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A NARROW ESCAPE.

Reprinted from "All the Year Round."

BY ANNIE THOMAS,

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ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A NARROW ESCAPE.



CHAPTER I.

AT LUGNAQUILLA.

THE luncheon seems very long to Kate, who, like all other impatient-natured people, is anxious that something else than is happening shall happen soon. It is long for two reasons. In the first place, Captain Bellairs is so situated that he can, without such effort as may command attention and observation from others, pay Kate a variety of those delicate attentions which a man delights in offering to a woman he loves. In the second place, Mr. Grange delights in the feats accomplished by the Lugnaquilla *chef-de-cuisine*, and in the produce of the Lugnaquilla

gardens. His taste is varied in the extreme, and he skims over fertile plains of fruit and vegetables, and hovers lovingly over rich plots of broils and game, and pours copious libations of fragrant wine over all these exploits, in a way that sets time and Kate's impatience at defiance.

Quiet Charlotte Grange meanwhile preserves unruffled that masterly inactivity, which induces the great majority who study her to believe her to be such an admirable and trustworthy creature. The man who grabs at the wine, and hangs with greedy voluptuous satisfaction over the fruit, is her brother, but not one whit does that consideration harass or disturb her. . He has his individuality, and she knows, none better, that it is a detestable one. She has her own, and she knows—none better—that it has already impressed Frank Forest, and may impress this other man who is far better worth winning than Frank Forest. So she bides her time very patiently, saying very little, letting her fair placid presence act as

a calming charm upon them, but keeping her eyes wide open with the innocent gaze of childhood, on the watch for a good opportunity of working her will in any way that may be shown to her.

It is Mrs. Durgan who breaks up the magic circle presently. "Take Miss Mervyn to the tower, Harry," she says, "and down by the lake, and show her all that's worth seeing (and every bit of it is worth seeing) of dear old Lugnaquilla. I wish I could go with you," she adds to Kate, "I'm so afraid that Harry will miss something ; however, we'll come again and again till you know it and like it as well as I do."

She does not include Miss Grange in her invitation to Kate to be shown the house and grounds by Harry Bellairs. In fact, she pointedly avoids even looking towards that young lady as she speaks ; and Frank Forest is disposed to be rather huffy, and to think his friend's cousin a trifle discourteous to the quiet, amiable, pretty woman who has been expressing her artistic appreciation of the

beauties of Lugnaquilla. He almost feels as if Kate — his own generous Kate — were guilty of aiding and abetting in this slight on another woman, when, in obedience to Mrs. Durgan's request, Miss Mervyn goes off with her host alone.

Mrs. Durgan's chair is wheeled out into the garden under the shade of a weeping elm; and Mr. and Mrs. Grange seat themselves by her on perilous camp-stools, and proceed to cultivate her, according to their lights, for the sake of the owner of all these glories, whose eyes may be opened to a sense of the rare merit of Charlotte. For a while after their exit Charlotte goes on sketching assiduously; then she throws her pencil down and says—

“How unkind it was of them not to let me go with them, wasn't it, Mr. Forest? This is just the sort of place I delight in — just the sort of place I may never have an opportunity of seeing again.”

“I'm but a poor guide in comparison with Bellairs,” Frank says, “but do let me do my

best to show you what is worth seeing, will you ?”

“If we meet them, how then? you will want to join them, forgetful of the wise old saw about two being company, &c., and I shall have to come back alone.”

She holds her hand out to him as she says this, as if to plead for a pledge from him that he will not desert her in the way she describes. He takes it, and presses it before he returns it to her, and enunciates a few excited words that are, luckily for himself, very void of meaning.

“Then we’ll go,” she says, rising up; and so, with just a black lace shawl thrown over her carefully braided crown of rich golden-brown hair, they go out and stroll along dangerously secluded avenues, where they are undisturbed by any other person, and where Frank feels himself constrained to utter, in his rapid thoughtless way, all sorts of nonsense, which he had not had the most remote intention of uttering when he proposed coming out.

They go in at last, and he takes her to the vast drawing-room, each of whose deep bay windows is curtained off by heavy velvet curtains, and made to resemble a little room. They linger here long, for there is much to be looked at. Paintings and statues; portraits of dead and forgotten ancestors and ancestresses; mosaics from Florence; cameos from Rome; quaint pieces of old Belgian cabinets covered with carving, and enriched with delicate traceries of iron-work; old Spanish mirrors and reliquaries; gold and bronze crucifixes; queer old Delft platters; Dresden monsters, and flowers growing in huge vases in every part of the room.

It is no wonder (design on Miss Grange's part aside) that they linger about in this charmed spot till the afternoon is drawing to a close. They grow confidential in this well arranged solitude. That is to say, Frank tells Miss Grange all he can remember about himself that is most interesting to himself, and she—listens and tells him nothing.

The light has grown very soft and low by the time Captain Bellairs and Kate come into the room to tell Frank that all the party have agreed to stay to dinner, and that it is time for him to go and dress.

“As I have no toilette to make, I think I’ll stay here for a few minutes,” Miss Grange says; “then I’ll join the others on the lawn.”

So Kate and the two men leave her, and she gives them a smiling, sweet nod, as they turn round to take a last look at her and the room when they reach the door.

In about seven or eight minutes Kate finds herself sauntering back into this room with Frank, who is declaring that he has plenty of time to dress, and that he wants to have five minutes’ quiet talk with his cousin. The light, soft and low as it is, is still strong enough for them to see that Miss Grange has vanished—that the room is empty.

“Miss Grange is gone! Ah! she soon got tired of this room that she declared to be

‘so enthralling,’ when you left it, Frank,” Kate says out distinctly as she enters.

“Which way can she have gone?” Frank says with a puzzled air; “I have been out in the hall all this time, and I don’t remember seeing this door open, and she certainly didn’t pass me.”

“She is one of those softly moving earthly bodies who can pass from one place to another without causing much commotion in the matter about them,” Kate says carelessly. “Well, as she is gone, I confess I am very glad of it, for I want to ask you something that I should be sorry for any one to hear, Frank.”

They are standing a little way from the entrance door as she says this, and she steps back and gives the door a gentle push that just closes it, and then returns to her former place by Frank’s side.

“Dear Frank,” she begins, and as she speaks, she throws hat, whip, and gauntlets down on a sofa near her, “I may ask you anything. I’m too fond of you for it to be

possible for you to be angry with me for anything I may ask you, am I not?"

For answer he whispers, "Yes, dear," and takes both her hands and draws her towards him, while she, as a sister might, holds her face towards him for the kiss he is so ready to give her.

"Do you like that pretty, smooth-tongued, smooth-faced woman as well as you seem to do, Frank, dear?" she questions earnestly; "I wouldn't try to set you against any one I hated even, if I believed your liking was genuine——"

"Why should you hate poor Miss Grange?" he asks reproachfully.

"I don't," she retorts quickly, with some surprise; "I only distrust her, and I nearly hate myself for doing that, but I can't help it. Dear, dear Frank, I know with what fell rapidity you would weary of a fool if you were linked with one—but—will you be perfectly happy with a schemer?"

He laughs aside her question, he mocks at her fears, and hints that jealousy is at the

root of them ; and Kate bears all he says quietly enough, for as she has truly said she is "very fond" of this man, with whom she is not in love any longer. His vanity is flattered. He is pleased at the sight of Kate's loving anxiety about him, and well contented to hear that Miss Grange is suspected of scheming for him. He would indignantly deny any such feelings if taxed with them, but they reign right loyally in his breast nevertheless.

"Well, if you won't tell me now, perhaps you will another time," Kate says with a half vexed laugh ; and again they incline their heads towards one another, and he just brushes her forehead with his moustache. Then they go away from the drawing-room together, and as they do so Miss Grange emerges from behind one of the curtains, where she has successfully played the exalted part of listener, undetected, to the whole of their conversation.

"She couldn't fascinate him into saying a word against me," she tells herself, as she

sits down on the sofa, to recover from the slight excitement into which she has been thrown by the unexpected advantage she has been able to take over Kate ; “ he must be further gone than I thought he was,” she adds to herself, and her bosom heaves, and her eyes almost flash, as she feels with a thrill that if she only goes on as discreetly as she has begun, the days of her bondage to her brother and sister are numbered.

She sits there contemplating possibilities longer than she intended. Then she hears Frank’s voice evidently approaching from the staircase.

“ Hallo ! ” he says, addressing Kate, “ have you been there all the time ? ”

“ Yes,” Kate answers from a window close outside the drawing-room door, “ I’ve been watching that group on the lawn. How pretty and graceful Mrs. Durgan is, isn’t she ? Oh ! do come in here with me, and get my hat and gloves, will you ? ”

The door is opened without an instant’s delay, and Kate and Frank are staring at

her in obvious astonishment before Miss Grange can rise and hide herself again.

“You must have been here all the time, and heard us wondering where you were,” Kate says, in accents of bitter contempt which she does not make the slightest attempt to conceal.

Miss Grange laughs long with very forced merriment in reply, and says, “Yes, she was there, and wasn’t it a good joke.” She holds her hand again out to Frank in an apparently unpremeditated burst of friendliness and familiarity, and reliance on his having as keen an appreciation of the “joke” as herself.

“You were here all the time, behind the curtain?” Frank asks. Miss Grange nods what she wishes to look like a merry assent; and Kate turns her eyes on her cousin. However shocked he may be at the mean trick; however degraded, by her own low act, he may feel the woman before them to be, he does not show a trace of either of these feelings in the expression of his face.

“ But it must have hurt him awfully,” Kate thinks, as she turns and walks out of the atmosphere which she feels to be tainted. “ It would have been painful enough to find a common acquaintance guilty of such a breach of everything that is honourable and womanly ; but it must be agonizing to a man to find a woman he likes very much, affecting to glory in and laugh at such shame as this. Poor Frank ! he will be obliged to speak of it to me, too, though, to spare her feelings, he tried to look as if he thought it a natural thing that a woman should play the part of spy among her friends.”

In the intensity of her desire to spare the found-out sneak the further mortification of being openly slighted before a man who likes her, Kate Mervyn does violence to her own feelings of disgust at, and detestation of, a species of meanness for which there is no forgiveness among the ranks of gentle-people. It is the “ unpardonable sin ” in the estimation of the well-bred ; and, as

Frank is a gentleman, Kate pictures his mortified disappointment at the conduct of this woman with whom he has been friendly, and between whom and himself a certain amount of gay fooling had gone on. She pictures his mortified disappointment, and pities him for it, and, for his sake, reserves the open exhibition of the scorn she feels for Miss Grange until such time as he may not be by to be hurt by it.

But her own organ of self-esteem has suffered a terrible shock. Having known her, how could he have allowed himself to decline to such a low level as a flirtation with a woman who could be guilty of this gross offence? "Some instinct ought to have taught a man to shun her," Kate tells herself; and, in her wrath, she resolves that as soon as she can do it, without hurting Frank, she will proclaim the pestilential mental malady, the noxious craving for information at any price, under which Miss Grange labours, and save so much of society as may be infested by her from her baleful influence.

It gives her a pang of genuine, honest sorrow when she goes into the dining-room this day by the side of Georgie Durgan's chair, to hear Miss Grange and Frank behind her, chatting and laughing as lightly and merrily together as if he had no sense of honour, and she had not lost hers to his knowledge. It almost stings Kate into the taking of instant, open action; it almost makes her proclaim that they are, one and all, unsafe while this creeping thing is among them. But she restrains herself, and only shows anger in her face and manner, which anger is attributed by Frank to jealousy, and by Miss Grange to annoyance at having been overheard by the fair detective to express herself more warmly towards Frank than she would wish all the world to know.

In justice to Kate, be it understood, that no sensation of fear, however slight, assails her heart on her own account. She remembers each epithet of affection she has applied to Frank during that interview; she recalls

each kiss she has exchanged with him, and she is neither ashamed nor afraid, though she is fully conscious that Miss Grange will try to use them as weapons when the time comes.

Whatever Frank may feel on the subject, he preserves a most debonair and light-hearted manner, and does not for a minute relax in those attentions to Miss Grange which she has cleverly taught him to pay her. The sharpest, bitterest thought which has poisoned Kate's peace of mind for a long time is this one, namely, that when other people know Charlotte Grange's meanness, Frank will be a lesser man in their estimation than he had been hitherto, for condoning it.

She keeps silence on the point until she is driving home with Mrs. Durgan this night. Guinevere has been sent home with a groom. Then, as soon as they are well away from Lugnaquilla, she says—

“What do you think of those people whom my cousin has brought upon yours?”

“I think they’re odious,” Mrs. Durgan says. “Miss Grange is worse than the others, because, though she’s more rotten at the core than her brother and sister, she has a sound, attractive exterior. You are arraying yourself against her, I can see?”

“Yes,” Kate says hotly; “I can forgive any crime, any fault, any folly, but I am intolerant to crawling meanness.” Then she tells the tale of the couchant fair one behind the curtain; and Miss Grange may count on two open enemies from this day forth.

CHAPTER II.

“THE LITTLE SPECK ON GARNERED FRUIT.”

THEY are long, lazy, happy, sunny days that follow on this reunion. Though “the rain it raineth every day” in Ireland, still the climate is so joyous that it beams out into the broadest and sunniest smiles immediately after the heaviest showers.

The Granges hold on at Bray with the tenacity of limpets; and with an amount of endurance that is admirable in its way, Mr. Grange goes through the long-drawn-out agony of a swiftly running hotel bill for the sake of his sister, when, but for her, he could live upon his mother-in-law for nothing in London. But his wife points out to him that the end will justify the means, and that he will be thrice blessed

in the peace he is purchasing for the future at the cost of the few extra pounds in the present.

On his side it must be admitted that his sister Charlotte, for whom he is making these sacrifices, is not an unmixed blessing. She gibes at him, when they are alone, whenever she has the opportunity, and he gives frequent opportunities for gibing.

"It will not be for long," his wife tells him, when he groans under the weight of his chains, and complains that Charlotte has become more arrogant of late, and more insolently self-assured in her demeanour. "It will not be for long; Frank Forest flirts with her now in the most open and undisguised manner; though he must see as plainly as the rest do that his pet, Kate, of whom he used to think so much, hates her; and I am sure I don't wonder at that," Mrs. Grange continues—"for without being able to fix on any one thing in particular that's objectionable about Charlotte, she is hateful from some cause or other."

“She ought to remember what she owes to you, I am sure,” Mr. Grange replies nervously, for, above all things, he dreads his wife rising against his sister, and perhaps compelling him to take sides against that handsome family incubus. But Mrs. Grange is wiser in her generation than to do this. Better a brief period of acute pain which may result in being freed for the rest of their lives from the cause of it, than the long-drawn-out agony of Charlotte for ever unmarried on their hands.

It comes about quite naturally, through the good-natured agency of Mrs. Durgan, that Kate has nearly the daily use of Guinevere, and that Captain Bellairs and Frank are her constant escorts. Two or three times during the course of these rides, a word or two has been said about the Granges, by one or other of the men. But Kate cannot bring herself to respond to them in such a way as to induce Frank to continue the topic.

“Surely he is too honourable himself to

really like a dishonourable woman," Kate tells herself sometimes, as she looks at her cousin. But her belief in this being the case is sure to be dashed to the ground the next time she sees Frank and Miss Grange together. If he does not like her he seems to like her, and certainly devotes an unconscionable share of his society and conversation to her. Gradually Miss Grange absorbs him so when the whole party happen to be together of an evening, that Kate has no alternative but to regard his manner to Miss Grange as an insult to the friendship he still sometimes professes for her, Kate.

With all the unguardedness of her honest, courageous nature, she shows her cool aversion to Charlotte Grange plainly to her cousin; and he lightly and gaily disregards it, makes no allusion to it, treats it with the same affable indifference with which he would treat a fit of futile, groundless jealousy. The worst part of the whole unpleasant affair to Kate is that she cannot

help seeing that Frank's feelings of honour are as blunt as those of Miss Grange. For, "if it were not so, he must have said something to me about that scene in the drawing-room at Lugnaquilla," she says to Mrs. Durgan, to whom she has laid bare the secret of the repulsion she feels for the amiable, fair, smiling, courteous Miss Grange.

"A glamour is thrown over him," Mrs. Durgan says; "he's a clever, brilliant fellow, that cousin of yours, Kate, but he is as unstable as water and as vain as a peacock. I shouldn't worry myself about him if I were you; let him be snared by her, he doesn't deserve a better fate, if, knowing what he does of her, he can make a parade of preferring her friendship to yours."

"It's that that mortifies me," Kate confesses; "I could have borne to be thrown over by Frank for a superior, but for a woman who is infinitely my inferior——"

"It's hard to be thrown over for anybody," Mrs. Durgan says sadly. "The only thing left, it seems to me, is to say, in

the words of the old song, 'I'll never love thee more,' and stick to the determination."

"But I can never say that about Frank," Kate says candidly; "I can't leave off liking him, and I can't leave off feeling ashamed that he should let me think that he is at the feet of a woman who is so much lower than any woman ought to be whose name can ever be associated with his—that's the nuisance of it. People say he was very much taken, or very attentive to, or whatever the stupid phrase may be, with Miss So-and-so and half a dozen somebody-elses, and we all get classed together, and regarded as being of the same moral and intellectual status; it does sting me!"

For a moment Mrs. Durgan's bright face becomes more radiantly bright than usual.

"You're a little in love with your cousin," she says; and her face dims slightly as Kate answers with truthful energy—

"No, I'm not now, not in the least degree; but I have been, you know, and I can't lose my interest in him."

“What would you say if you heard that Harry Bellairs were fascinated by her too?” Mrs. Durgan presently asks; and Kate replies steadily enough, though her heart is throbbing—

“There would be nothing unnatural, nothing disgraceful in that; he does not know what Frank and I do, and she’s as fair to the eye, as pretty and as pleasant as a woman need be.”

“If Harry should prove himself weak, and she’s playing for the highest stake, and will only take your cousin when she has failed to secure mine, cannot you strip the mask off, and tell him what you know her to be?”

“Yes,” Kate says, without hesitation; “she may hold her course now as she likes, and I won’t shut her out of every honest house by proclaiming her conduct; but if she attempts to mix herself up with the life of any one I love, that one shall know her for what she is——”

“Then you love Harry?” Mrs. Durgan

says quietly ; " well, dear, I don't wonder at it," and she holds a frank, friendly hand out to Kate, who stands, scarlet and self-convicted, before her.

Kate takes the friendly hand in all friendliness, as it is offered to her ; but she says not a word. She is not given to proclaiming her feelings on the housetops, unless she has some well-defined motive, or is carried away by impulse. In this case she has been carried away by impulse, but having regained her judgment under the influence of the shock of feeling that she has openly betrayed herself, she tells herself that there is no dishonesty in maintaining a discreet reserve. That Mrs. Durgan has divined what is in her heart about Harry Bellairs is patent. But there will be no deception, no sneaking treachery in her remaining quiescent about it now, and no attempt at throwing dust in anybody's eyes in the mere fact of refraining from wearing her heart upon her sleeve.

" Is she glad or sorry ? " Kate asks herself a dozen times in the course of the ensuing

few days, during which Mrs. Durgan is kinder to her than ever. "Does she think I am loving above my state in daring to care for a man who is the head of the house into which she has married? At any rate she never tries to make me feel that I am doing so: she's as generous as if she had no interest in the matter."

Kate makes this admission to herself in utter unsuspicion of Mrs. Durgan having such an interest in the matter, that, though she will not leave a plan unmade that may facilitate intercourse between her beautiful companion and her cousin, every hope that has made life bright to her of late years faints, fails, dies away within her, as she sees how dear that intercourse is becoming to both of them. But she never flags in her course, and never has a harsh thought concerning those who are unwittingly causing her the sharpest mental agony she has ever known.

Happy in her new home life, in the warm sympathy of her new friend, and the constant companionship of Harry Bellairs, Kate

still has her mighty trial. Charlotte Grange is the thorn in her pillow, the cloud on her otherwise bright horizon, the bane of her life! She revolts at the sight of this unprincipled woman's visibly growing influence over Frank, and inwardly resents, as the deadliest insult Frank could have offered to her, the sight of the transfer of his devotion to Miss Grange.

But worse things than the enforced passive endurance of the growth and ripening of this bitter fruit await Kate. She finds herself one day forced, by the pressure of the general intimacy which has been established, into an hour's uninterrupted conversation with Miss Grange; and to Kate's great, unfeigned, disgusted surprise, Miss Grange does not shirk it!

That young woman, indeed, appears to be positively pleased at the prospect of holding unfettered communication with Frank's cousin, and in this pleasure there is rank offence to Kate. "If you were ashamed to look me in the face I might be idiotic enough

to pity you, and so be tempted to hold my dagger," Miss Mervyn says to herself, on the occasion of her finding herself forced into the position of being Miss Grange's entertainer one morning. As it is, misplaced pity has no part with her, and her manner is harder, cruder, more unlike her own than it has ever been to a human being in her life before.

Charlotte Grange has come here with her claws sharpened this day. She is prepared for the battle, for all the sultry calm and quiet of her demeanour. Frank has been dangling after her of late, but he has not been definite. He has paced round and round the trap, but the bait has not been sufficiently tempting to induce him to taste it to his own destruction as yet. Miss Grange has looked around her for a cause for this halting on his part, and in her own heart has decided that his discretion is due to his cousin.

That she will sting that cousin out of even the semblance of affectionate interest in him, and so wound his pride, or his heart, or his

vanity, or whatever it is men are wounded in by evil speakers, liars, slanderers, and busy-bodies, is only a natural resolve for Miss Grange to come to.

"It is pleasant to get you alone, and keep your conversation to myself for once," Miss Grange begins with well assumed friendly interest, as Kate reluctantly opens the disagreeable meeting by asking her unwelcome guest to be seated. "Mrs. Durgan or Captain Bellairs always monopolize you when we meet at Lugnaquilla, and I stand no chance of getting a word from you."

"There are very few people in the world who would stand a chance of getting a word from me when I am able to get a word from either Mrs. Durgan or Captain Bellairs," Kate says. Then she adds undauntedly, half hoping that her words may lead to a climax—

"My cousin Mr. Forest is one of that minority. I have no other acquaintances about me now whom I don't either dislike or despise."

She looks Miss Grange straight in the eyes as she says this, and this composed adversary does not either droop them, or change countenance in the slightest degree, or in any way make manifest that she is conscious of feeling less innocent than a mountain dove.

“Indeed,” she says quietly, when Kate has thrown her verbal gauntlet down. “Indeed ; you seem to be so fond of Frank that I wish I had brought him over here to-day to see you ; but I thought that it would be pleasant for us to have a little quiet chat together. I don’t like to have a man running after me perpetually.”

Those women only who have been goaded in the same way can understand how all the hate and rage that have hitherto been dormant in her nature, wake into life in Kate’s breast as she hears this mean, undermining intruder grow insolent in her strength, and proclaim her triumph over Frank’s credulity. To hear him called “Frank” too, by this woman, who says out the name with the light, easy, familiar air of one who is well accustomed to

utter it ! Kate feels degraded, as she looks at her successor and knows what manner of woman she is, by the spasm of jealousy which contracts her heart. Not that there is anything degrading in the jealousy itself ; it is not the savage, insatiate offspring of passion ; it is only the natural result of the real honest liking, the genuine affectionate sympathy, the warm anxious regard which she has still for the man whom she once loved.

But Miss Grange mistakes it and its causes, and there comes a gleam of malignant satisfaction at her own power of pain, into her gentle eyes. Her satisfaction is slightly damped, however, by Kate's next words.

"I am rather surprised to hear that my cousin, Mr. Forest, should have allowed himself to be swayed even in a trifling matter by you ; perhaps you have made yourself mistress of some secret which he desires to have kept, by hiding behind a curtain, or peeping through a keyhole, and you hold it

over him as a threat. It is just the kind of thing you would do, I should imagine."

Kate speaks with the precision and cold distinctness of intense concentrated contempt. But the woman she addresses is contempt-proof. Miss Grange merely throws her head up, and ripples out a clear, rather loud laugh, that actually shakes her plump person. That there is nothing genuine in the laughter—that it does not take its rise in amusement, or mirthful feeling, or delicately tickled humour, is little to the purpose. She laughs; as if Kate's accusation were so eminently ridiculous a thing that no sensible woman need attempt to refute it.

"How touchy you are about my having heard—quite by accident—the little advances you made to Frank, my dear," she says saucily; "you've evidently brooded over it, and come to think a great deal of it. Men are so different. Frank never gets in the least annoyed when I laugh at him about it."

The coarse callous hardihood with which

Miss Grange can ignore so entirely her own shameful part in the scene to which she makes this irritating reference, is infinitely more bewildering and enraging to Kate than is the galling allusion to her own share in the transaction. That at least, even if a little over tender, had been true and womanly ; whereas Charlotte Grange had been so entirely contemptible, that Kate feels something of humiliation in holding any communion with her, and is silent through sheer amazement.

But Miss Grange, quiet, undisturbed, and calm, takes advantage of Kate's staggered silence at her laughter to say, "I wouldn't bring Frank with me to-day, because my sister-in-law is so fond of prophesying, and it bores me. She declares that Frank Forest is in love with me—as if I cared whether he is or not !"

CHAPTER III.

DRAWING THE SWORD.

It is difficult to say, after this passage of arms between them (which is fortunately interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Durgan), which is the more distrustful of the other—Miss Mervyn or Miss Grange. The former does not for an instant underrate her adversary, although she dislikes her with the dislike that only a woman who feels herself to be supplanted by an inferior can bring to bear upon that person. But Charlotte Grange goes even further than this in her power of appreciating a foe ; she actually credits that foe with the capability of pursuing the same line of conduct as herself, and guards herself carefully against being stabbed in the back, and undermined generally.

It is true that she has during this interval of incessant intercourse (which has been established by means of Grange pertinacity, and antique furniture sketching) acquired the right to call Mr. Forest by his christian name. He calls her Charlotte—a name by the way which he abhors, but which she has taught him to utter glibly—rather than remain on the solid commonplace ground of mere acquaintanceship, which is indicated by the word “Miss.” How he has been led into the error—for he feels it to be one—he does not know. But he finds himself calling her Charlotte, and hears himself addressed as Frank, with the ease of custom, before her people and his friend Bellairs.

The knowledge that his Cousin Kate—whom he still likes intensely—intensely dislikes this woman into whose power he is drifting, acts upon him as an irritant rather than a check. He has a feeling, which he does not word even to himself, that Kate, though she does not want him herself, does not want any other woman to have him.

He has not sufficient generosity to accredit her with either affection or judgment in the matter. He puts it all down to jealousy of a small order, and tries to make himself believe that she would have developed the same antagonism had his choice fallen on some universally acknowledged "perfect woman nobly planned."

A vague sensation of discomfort seizes him whenever he finds himself alone with any one who may possibly choose to discuss Miss Grange's claims to his consideration. He has checked Bellairs several times already by the assertion that "she's an awfully nice, clever girl—just the sort of girl to make a heaven of a home for the fellow who's lucky enough to get her." Believing fighting the air to be a feeble practice, Bellairs does not combat the delusion, for "nothing of that sort lasts long with Frank," he tells himself, as he sees Frank winding the coils round himself closer and closer every day.

This morning it has been sorely against Frank's will that Miss Grange has betaken

herself to Breagh Place unattended by him. That she has a motive in doing so, he half fears, for in spite of himself it is impressed upon him that there is a motive in the simplest action of this quiet girl. But he does not for a moment suspect her real motive, which is to sow the seed of belief in his being in love with her in his Cousin Kate's mind.

Bray seems very dull to him, however, after Charlotte's departure for Mrs. Durgan's place. He has ridden over from Lugnaquilla, intending to loiter about the picturesque secluded Dargle, and superintend Miss Grange's sketching all day; and when he finds that he is left to his own devices, while she goes to pay "a mere ceremonial visit," as she says, he feels sulkily disposed to review his position with Miss Grange, and to think that she had no right, "after all," to go off in this way and leave him to be dull, either by himself, or with her "detestable brother and sister."

In fact, the habit of the woman is upon

him ; and here in this place, where he is cut off from his home pursuits and home annoyances, he has grown too much accustomed to her manner of passing away his time, to patiently submit to being made his own custodian for a while.

He contrives to stir up his own interest presently, by conjecturing a variety of things concerning the three women who are together at Breagh Place, none of which bear the remotest resemblance to the truth. He pictures Charlotte (who is a capital talker when alone with him) amusing and bewitching Mrs. Durgan and Kate by the flow of her quiet humour and power of narrating incidents, in a way that is prejudicial to the persons to whom they refer, without being openly ill-natured. He knows that she has this art, but he is pleased with her at present, and fancies that it is a womanly and noble one, and feels himself injured rather than otherwise in that he is not present to be edified by it.

Actuated by these mixed feelings, he pre-

sently gets on his horse, and rides over to Breagh Place, resolving rather to brave being laughed at about Charlotte, than to bear the burden of himself any longer. "They'll see I'm running after her," he confesses to himself, half shamefacedly, "and Kate will probably get on the stilts; but I can't help it."

A slight chill falls upon him when he finds himself in their midst by-and-by. The mere power of her will has caused Miss Grange to be invited to luncheon by Mrs. Durgan, to whom Charlotte insists on talking rather confidentially concerning "Frank," and his literary prospects and surface weaknesses. Kate meanwhile sits silently by, half doubting that there is any foundation for this fatal familiarity, and still wholly fearing that there may be.

"He is a man who requires sympathy," Miss Grange asserts; "and he has never had it from his own family; he has told me so himself, and I can see that he feels it bitterly, poor fellow," she adds with

malicious emphasis, as she sees Kate wince under the sting of the statement.

“You imagine that you can give it to him, I suppose?” Mrs. Durgan says, with a laugh that is not complimentary to the one whom she addresses. In spite of a certain dagger that Kate is unconsciously pressing well home to Mrs. Durgan’s heart, the latter lady likes her well, and is strengthened in that first openly expressed opinion of hers, that Kate “couldn’t be mean.” Therefore she does not hesitate to draw the sword and use it, when Kate’s opponent waves a flag of defiance.

“He imagines that I can, at any rate,” Miss Grange says, turning large calm eyes full upon her interlocutor as she speaks. “Frank tells me that you don’t know much about them”—she continues, addressing Kate as if she were an outsider;—“but from what you do know of them, shouldn’t you be inclined to think his sisters shallow and frivolous?”

“You forget that you are speaking of my cousins,” Kate says, and scarlet waves of

indignation ebb and flow over her face as she says it. Then, even as these shells are bursting, Frank comes in, and, after the usual custom on these occasions, the guiltless look guilty, and the guilty guiltless.

If put to the crucial test of speaking on their words of honour, neither Mrs. Durgan nor Kate would feel themselves to be social sinners. But now, when Frank comes into their midst, and looks at them suspiciously and at Miss Grange sympathetically, they feel as if they had fallen short and been found wanting in some way or other ; as if, in fact, they had not been merciful to the stranger within their gates.

“I am so glad you’ve come,” Miss Grange murmurs, with an ardour that is foreign to her general manner. She half holds her plump white hand out towards him too as she speaks, and Frank finds himself taking the extended offering, under the astonished gaze of his Cousin Kate, before he thinks of attempting to salute Mrs. Durgan, whom he has nominally come to visit.

"I am so glad you've come," Miss Grange repeats, and this time she laughs blithely and throws a glance aside at Kate, and altogether pourtrays by her manner that she is perfectly at rest now "he" has come, in a way that thrills Kate with wrath at the assurance which she still prays may have no foundation in fact.

They pass a half hour that is disagreeable to the last degree to two of them, and that is not altogether a period of unmitigated bliss to Frank, who feels himself to be a disputed point, and who knows himself to be but a mere weather-cock between the rival blasts of duty and inclination. The former drags him back, every now and again, under Kate's influence ; but the latter draws him softly on, and prostrates him, as it were, under the influence of the woman who never lets it slacken for want of incessant attention. In fact, Kate represents a past, in which he sustained a defeat, while Charlotte represents a present, in which he may have it all his own way if he pleases.

“They’re not engaged yet : take comfort in that thought, and intervene before he compasses his own destruction by proposing to her,” Mrs. Durgan says in a low voice to Kate, as Kate makes the necessity for attending to the comfort of the invalid the excuse for murmuring some expression of hopelessness in her friend’s ear.

“She seems to be well satisfied with the arrangement, whatever it is, as it stands,” Kate says impatiently. “He’s enervated by her wiles now, but if you could see him as he really is, you would know what a dear fellow he is, and understand why I am so anxious about him.”

Mrs. Durgan looks up brightly, hopefully, enthusiastically almost.

“See here, Kate,” she says; “a word from you in love, not in friendship!—what man would barter love and slavery for friendship and freedom?—but in love, would bring him—I won’t say ‘back’ to you, because I don’t believe he’s ever strayed in reality—but away from her. Utter it!”

“I can’t,” Kate laughs, but there is vexation in her laugh, Mrs. Durgan detects; “don’t think that I want him in love—not that he’d come to me if I did—but she’s not the one to win him.”

“She’s the one to woo, and those who woo so artistically often win,” Mrs. Durgan says, shaking her head. “Look at them now! there she is, while we are wasting our time in idle talk, making him believe that she has been struggling against circumstances all the morning, and that we have been intensely disagreeable to her; and, in short, that she has been playing the martyr’s part for his dear sake. Go to him, and be outspoken, Kate, and tell her I want to speak to her.”

Kate feels herself impelled by Mrs. Durgan’s energy to obey Mrs. Durgan’s instructions, but she dislikes doing so exceedingly. It is an odious task to set oneself, this of interrupting a conversation between two people who are openly manifesting the feeling that all the world is nought to them, and that

they only want each other. But in this case Kate is led on to do it, partly because she really feels that Frank is worthy of a little sacrifice of pride on her part, and partly because there is a passive defiance in Miss Grange's manner which rouses all Kate's fighting blood, and makes her long to strike a straightforward open blow.

"Mrs. Durgan has made me her envoy to you, Miss Grange," she begins, as she draws near to them, and she sees that Charlotte shrugs patiently deprecating shoulders at the interruption ; "she wishes you to go and talk to her about some ferns—you're learned in them, we have heard—and I want you for a few minutes, Frank," Kate continues, putting her hand within his arm, with the old caressing gesture that he can no more resist now than he could long ago.

Miss Grange knows the exact worth of every weapon that any adversary can employ in such a warfare as this, and she knows that Kate can strike sharply home

if she pleases. "But she's too refined to coarsely condemn, and anything short of coarse condemnation will fail to affect Frank against me now," the quiet adventuress thinks, as she walks off rather vauntingly, leaving the field open to her enemy, after giving Frank a long, lingering, clinging look, that bespeaks a wealth of intimacy between them.

"And now what is it, Kate?" Frank asks, as they saunter out from the conservatory; "if we are going to stroll through these woods, we may bring the others along with us, mayn't we?"

She turns her face and looks at him, and sees that his mouth is twitching, and his eyes dancing with suppressed laughter. He evidently partly fathoms her design of warning him, is mirthfully aware of it, and by no means disposed to thwart her exposition of feeling; at the same time she perceives that he will not be one whit impressed by it. All her fancied eloquence takes flight. She can no more bring herself

to utter any cautionary words, now that Miss Grange has fearlessly left the field free, than she could stab that young lady in the back.

“Have you nothing to tell me, Frank?” she asks persuasively, and her manner insensibly becomes impregnated with some of the old fondness that had been so infinitely delightful to him in the days of old.

“Nothing whatever, dear,” he replies, and his manner is abstracted, and his gaze wanders back through the conservatory, and fixes itself upon the lady who is lazily looking at ferns—the lady whose perfect repose is apparently by no means disturbed by the fear that her cause may be suffering during her enforced absence.

“How long do you stay at Lugnaquilla?”

“We’re all thinking of making a start next week.”

“All! Is Captain Bellairs going so soon?” Kate asks, forgetting the interest of the hour in the interest of her life.

“No, no ; Bellairs stays on here—he’s sweet on his cousin, I believe,” Frank says : as if whether Bellairs were, or were not, was an utterly unimportant matter to every one.

“Then whom do you mean by ‘all’?” Kate persists, recurring to the interest of the hour.

“The Granges and myself,” he answers unhesitatingly.

“The Granges have ceased to be obnoxious to you ?” she says.

“Have they, by Jove ? not a bit of it. That fellow and his wife are two of the greatest bores out.”

“Then why do you attach yourself to them, when you could stay on at dear, sweet Lugnaquilla, with a man who is less of a bore than any other human being ?”

“Because there happens to be a human being with the Granges at present, who bores me even less than Bellairs,” Frank laughs. “Now you have driven me into a corner, Kate, and compelled me to decide as to the cause of my recently developed

toleration for the Granges, I know it to be that girl," and he inclines his head in the direction of the guileless Charlotte.

"That girl!" Kate repeats with angry contempt; "don't tell me in earnest that she has cast a glamour over you."

"She would be a cleverer girl even than she is, if she could 'cast a glamour,' as you call it, over me," Frank says with genuinely manly conceit; "but she's just the kind of girl that any fellow who sees much of her must fall madly in love with."

"Frank!" Kate gasps.

"Why, you're not surprised, are you?" Frank questions, looking with foolish fondness in the direction of the disputed point. "I didn't quite realize—I never told myself even till you asked me; if you hadn't almost worded it for me, I should have gone on probably in unsuspectance of the real state of my feelings; but now I know that if I could contribute to her happiness in any way, even by giving her to another fellow, I'd do it."

Kate looks at him in pity and surprise, and admires him, in spite of her reason and judgment, for his chivalry. One shot she cannot resist firing, though she knows that it will glance off, and neither kill nor cure his misplaced passion.

“Get some richer man than yourself to marry her, then, if you’d contribute to her happiness, Frank,” she says; and Frank looks at her wistfully, and replies—

“You hurt me more than you can imagine, by even feigning to doubt her perfect integrity.”

CHAPTER IV.

“IT IS CRUEL TO HER AND TO ME.”

“ABOVE all things, I detest underground passages,” Kate says, when she has brought her account of her brief interview with her cousin to a close ; “and yet, Mrs. Durgan, I couldn’t bring myself to speak out my detestation of that woman openly. As it is, I have done more harm than good : I’ve made him define his feelings to himself, and cast a sort of halo round her.”

“I detest underground passages too, but I admit that I take them sometimes,” Mrs. Durgan laughs. “Oh, Kate ! I wonder if, when you find me out, you will ever forgive me ? ”

Kate disregards the question. She would have to unlearn all she has learnt of Mrs.

Durgan's sweet, truthful nature before she could begin to conjecture what her emotions might possibly be if any untoward set of circumstances could ever force Mrs. Durgan to take other than a light and open path.

"She asked me, when she was going away, if I had told Frank what she had been saying about his unsympathetic family, and, before I could answer her, she added, 'You found that he shared my views, I'm sure,' just as if she knew ever so much more about him than I do." Kate goes on impatiently, "Her manner towards him when they were leaving was just that of a woman who was engaged to him. How he can endure the demonstration of her power I can't think."

"Probably she will be engaged to him before they reach Bray," Mrs. Durgan says quietly. "Make up your mind to it, Kate, and be glad that the man who is sacrificed isn't dearer to you than your cousin."

Kate is silent. This subject of her stronger affection for some one else than her

cousin is one that she cannot pursue with ease with Mrs. Durgan.

Meanwhile the pair under consideration are going back to Bray. The lady occupies the seat on the near side of the car, and Frank rides as close beside her as his spirited, fidgety horse will permit him to do. But the driver acts as a barrier between them, and the words that Frank utters every now and then, though they are fraught with promise for the future, are not so perfectly binding and unmistakable as she deems it well they should be.

Accordingly, when they are within a couple of miles of Bray, Miss Grange makes a gallant effort to conquer. She tells herself that if this effort fails, all further ones will be useless ; if she does not win to-day, in fact, she must lose.

But the game must be played out quickly now. The expenses of the hotel life at Bray are eating into the soul of her sister-in-law, who begins to demand interest for the money she has expended in the shape of assurances

of success, which Charlotte is not as yet justified in offering.

“I should like to walk the rest of the way,” she cries out to Frank as he comes up to her in a spasmodic and too suddenly arrested trot. “Do you think I may do it? I’m jerked to pieces by the jolting of this car.”

Frank responds by pulling up the driver, dismounting from his own horse, and helping Charlotte to alight. Then the car goes merrily bumping along without its fair freight, and the pair are left in the road that is judiciously brightened by the varied tints of the foliage in the hedges, and shadowed by the Wicklow mountains that loom far away to the right and left. He casts his horse’s bridle over his arm, and steps along to suit her slow, unhasting pace. As he does it, he feels that each step is carrying him nearer to the land of bondage; but he fancies that she who is luring him on to sojourn there with her will make it sweeter to him than any land of freedom could ever be.

"Don't you repent yourself bitterly of the folly if you're ever led into the error of paying a visit of mere politeness?" she says to him.

"I'm never led into that error," he says, with a laugh; "and I should think you were one to take your own line too decidedly ever to fall into it either."

"Don't you understand?" she says quickly. "My brother and sister pull the strings which regulate my actions just at present; they insisted upon it that it was due to Mrs. Durgan from one in my humble position that I should make acknowledgment of the honour she has done me in noticing me at all at Lugnaquilla by 'waiting upon her.'"

"The honour she has done you!" he repeats after her, and she sees that his chivalrous feeling of indignation against any one who "unnecessarily humiliates a helpless woman," &c., is roused. "You don't mean to say your people ever take that line with you?"

“Never mind what ‘my people’ do,” she says, affecting to speak lightly; “they are powerless to hurt me, I assure you. But let me tell my story out, and you shall hear how these two fine ladies at Breagh Place behaved to me to-day.”

An instinct of honesty makes him say, “They have neither of them any of the unpleasant attributes of fine ladies about them, surely? I know Kate hasn’t.”

Miss Grange shakes her head. “They played the part of putters-down of presumption for the first time for my benefit then,” she says musingly. “Frank, was it quite what you expected of your cousin, that she should try to break such a butterfly as I am on the wheel?”

“Kate is incapable of doing anything spiteful,” he asserts; but the very way in which he looks with questioning eagerness at her as he says it—looks as if he were longing far too anxiously for her to agree with him—emboldens her to say—

“So much for man’s judgment; at least,

so much for the judgment of a man whom a falsely frank manner has beguiled. Why, your Kate became emphatically what women call 'nasty' and men 'spiteful' when I unintentionally wounded her by mentioning you as if I were on terms of equality with you—mentioning you as I should mention any other man who had given me his friendship as you have done; in fact, she drew herself up, and begged me to remember that 'I was speaking of her cousin,' and altogether paraded me before Mrs. Durgan as a mere outsider, in a way that made me vow that my first should be my last visit to Breagh Place."

"It wasn't like Kate," is all he can bring himself to say, in his mortified agitation, as she brings her garbled statement to a conclusion.

In a vague way he feels sure that she is not telling all the truth concerning the manner of Kate—who, as he knew well, would never take a mean and underhand advantage of any enemy. But though he

thinks something is held back, in a passive way, by this quiet, sensitive, and sensible Miss Grange, he never suspects her for a moment of the active offence of lying by implication.

“Never mind,” she says, presently; “in spite of her fierce demand that I should recognize her claims of kindred to you, I shall find it hard to associate you two together in my memory when I go on my way, wherever it may be. Remembering all your kindness and courtesy, and all her rough unkindness, there will be no links to join you together in my mind, I’m glad to say.”

Slowly as they are walking, it is the lady who regulates the pace; she feels anxiously sure that the ground is slipping away from beneath her feet far too fast for her purpose. All her amiability towards Frank, all her animus towards Kate, all her little, premature wavings of the flag of victory and triumph will have been in vain, if Frank walks into Bray by her side this day a

free man ! So far, all has gone just exactly as she could have wished it to go ; but, if a hitch comes now, down will come the structure that need, ambition, and a sort of jealous, contemptuous, but still genuine, love for him has raised.

"Our last walk together, Frank," she says, in a half-absent kind of way, as she slackens speed, and seems to be giving the hedge-side, along which she is sauntering, the benefit of a most thorough investigation. "I can't help thinking that the law of compensation does not work in my case ; I am going away from Bray—and you and your cousin stay on here, in a lovely country, with the friends she loves best. What meritorious act has she committed that all the sunshine should fall on her side of the road, and what unpardonable sin have I sinned that all the shade should be on mine ?"

She seems to warm with her words ; she looks at him appealingly, searchingly, with a look that seems to crave for his sympathy.

Hers is not one of those flexible, mobile faces which quiver with every shade of a change of feeling. Nevertheless, it works now under the influence of real anxiety, for time is flying, and Frank is halting.

Against his instincts, against his better judgment—almost against his inclination, so incomprehensible are the workings of this man's mind—he is led on to say—

“ You shall neither leave Bray nor me, my darling. If my love can bring sunshine about your path, you shall have it for the rest of my life.”

He does not seal his pledge with a kiss, but he tucks her hand in his arm as she responds very definitely and deliberately with acquiescent words to his offer, and he calls her his “ own darling,” in an impassioned way that rather astonishes himself, and makes him doubt whether he is such a fool for being led on to this, as he was inclined to think himself while he was hesitating a minute or two ago.

“ Perhaps you had better speak to my

brother at once, Frank," she says; "he is rather peculiar—rather fidgety I must admit, and if he fancies that anything like concealment is being practised towards him, he will be annoyed."

"I'll have it out with him at once, if you wish it," Frank says, laughing. "I can't say, for my own part, that I am particularly fond of interviewing male relations on these interesting occasions, but it has to be done."

"I have quite as great a dislike to anything like fuss and parade about these matters as you can have," she says, "but we must do as custom commands, to a certain degree." Then she laughs in her quiet way, and adds, "My brother and sister-in-law imagine they will have the freedom of your house as before, I believe; I shall have the greatest pleasure in dispelling that illusion!"

She says it with a calm enjoyment of their anticipated discomfiture that is rather staggering to him. Her people are unpleasant to him to the last degree, but they are her people still, and it shocks him that she can

be so ready to turn upon them, and pay them back evil for the good they have done her in bringing her under his notice. But his lazy habit of allowing things to settle themselves, his distaste for explanations, his antipathy to the Granges, and his vain liking for the woman by his side, all combine to keep him from offering any protest against this cool disclaimer of any debt of gratitude being due from her to her brother.

“Mrs. Constable will be the greatest sufferer in this affair, Frank,” she says, presently; “she will have to renounce that cherished child of yours to me, for I will have no interference with my management: understand this, I will be everything or nothing in your house.”

“You shall be everything,” he laughs; “don’t vex yourself by supposing that my soul cleaves to Mrs. Constable to such a degree that I shall oppose her exit from under my roof-tree.” Then he goes on to explain that the Constable faction have made him taste of the waters of bitterness per-

petually, on account of that money of poor May's, which he is to do as he pleases with while he lives.

Sagacious Charlotte takes in every detail connected with the case, and weighs the consequences well of her marriage with him, even now in the first flush of her engagement. If he dies before her, the money will go to May's child, and she (Charlotte) will have nothing to depend on but the money she may be able to put by out of the income, while she has the spending of it.

"I'll make him work, and settle all that he gets by his writings on me," she thinks. "I know how to sting him on ; when once I am his wife I'll let him know the contempt I have for want of energy in men." On the whole, she thinks that though there might be a possibility of her doing better in the matrimonial mart, the probability is that she would do infinitely worse if she let this opportunity pass by. Therefore she determines that the engagement shall be made known as speedily as possible.

“ Frank Forest has asked me to marry him, and I have said yes,” she says, the instant they come into her brother’s presence ; and Mr. Grange tries not to look as overjoyed as he feels, at this blessed realization of their hopes and schemes.

Frank is rather astonished at the way he is being regulated by his last enslaver. She arranges the time and the terms in which he is to make known to his family the blessing he has brought upon himself. “ Miss Mervyn had better understand at once that she must alter her manner towards me, or make the sacrifice of holding no further intercourse with you, Frank,” she says. “ I have always felt that it is the due of any man I may marry, that his family shall treat me with respect.”

“ You are not fond of going out and fighting windmills, I hope, are you ?” he says, with a laugh ; and she answers quietly—

“ I will alienate you from any one who displeases me ; it is not fair to her, nor to me, that she should continue in the error of

thinking me a powerless person who may be offended with impunity. I hope you are not annoyed at my being so outspoken?"

She does not look as if she had a hope about the matter. Her whole manner is fraught with indifference to any opinion he may have about it.

"I always like outspoken people," he says, evasively; "you know where you are with them." He has begun his sentence with the intention of declaring that he will be as outspoken as herself, and that she had better understand from the first that nothing will make him forfeit his Cousin Kate's friendship; but his love of peace induces him to relinquish his determination, and for the first time in his life he feels himself to be a coward.

Worse than this, he feels himself to be a fool, when, later on in the day, he finds himself alone with Bellairs, and knows that the onus is on him of communicating the intelligence of his contemplated change of condition to his friend.

“ You don’t mean to say that she has done you like that, Forest ? Why, her game has been too plain all along ; you must have seen it.”

“ If a girl loves a fellow she can’t always conceal her feeling,” Frank expostulates.

“ Loves a fellow ! that woman hasn’t it in her to love anything but ease and luxury ; if I were free I’d make her an offer for the sake of freeing you, and then I’d throw her over as remorselessly as I would any other false-hearted cat. Kate fathomed her at once.”

“ Kate is jealous of her,” Frank says uneasily ; “ but look here, old fellow ; I’m going to marry her, so the less you say the better ; we may remember your words awkwardly by-and-by when she’s my wife ; the mischief’s done, and after all she’s a clever girl.”

“ Good luck and happiness to you, however it goes,” Bellairs says heartily ; “ now I must tell you something about myself.”

CHAPTER V.

“I’LL HAVE IT OUT WITH YOU.”

“MY Cousin Georgie has asked me to keep it quiet for some reason or other ; but I think the less humbug there is about these matters the better. The fact is, I’m engaged to her,” says Captain Bellairs.

“The devil you are !” Frank blurts out, his thoughts reverting to Kate in an instant. Bellairs safely out of the field, Kate might have been his, after all, if only that clever, cautious Charlotte had not taught him to think that it would be a very good thing that he should marry her. Not that a doubt has as yet risen in his mind as to the wisdom of the step he has taken—but Kate free, both hand and heart free, as he hopes, and himself fettered ! Unquestionably the position

is a perplexing if not altogether a disagreeable one. Small wonder that he feels annoyed with his friend for not having told him before of this engagement with Mrs. Durgan.

“Georgie is a dear little woman, and a clever little woman into the bargain,” Bellairs says rather discontentedly; “but I’m not prepared to swear that I am desperately in love with her, or anything of the kind. I’ve gone through the real thing, and I know what it is; but our marriage will keep Georgie in the home she loves, which she would have to leave in the ordinary course of events; and I am quite fond enough of her to make her as happy as a reasonable woman can expect to be made.”

“I don’t see through her object in keeping it dark so long,” Frank urges. “Has she kept it from Kate as well as the rest of us?”

Captain Bellairs turns a shade paler. “I’m sorry to say she has,” he says; “and, to tell the truth, I am feeling more about the con-

cealment having been practised towards Miss Mervyn than I like to talk about." As he speaks, his thoughts re-traverse the sunny paths he has been treading with Kate during these last few weeks; and as he recalls sundry unadvised looks and words that have passed between them, he is not conscience free.

"Kate isn't a girl to make a mistake," Frank says. "You know best how far you have gone with her; but she never magnifies small civilities, and she's not at all the type of girl to deliver herself up a feeble victim to unrequited affection——"

"I'm not conceited ass enough to imagine that she has given me a thought," Bellairs interrupts; and Frank answers (his mind, as usual, full of himself)—

"I had myself in view rather than you when I spoke, to tell the truth. It's useless my attempting to conceal the fact that I have been very spooney on Kate, and at one time she cared a good deal for me. However, all that's at an end, and Kate isn't the girl

to be jealous of a girl who succeeds her, if she happens to think well of the girl : as it is——” He pauses, and Bellairs takes up the word.

“As it is she doesn’t think well of this girl ; and you have more regard than you are quite prepared to allow left for her opinion. Well, Frank, old boy, there’s no help for it now.”

“I wish you would come over to Breagh Place with me. We will explode the two facts at the same time, and they’ll act as counter-irritants one on the other. I have worse things than you have to endure. There is Mrs. Constable to be faced, informed, and finally ousted from my house, which will be the stage for a scene of carnage when she hears I am going to marry again.” Frank says all this with a slight effort to be free and unembarrassed, jocular, and at peace in his manner ; but he fails, and his air of dejection appears to infect his friend.

“I also shall have torrents of feeling to stem when Cissy Angerstein finds out that I

am going to marry Georgie Durgan, and live in Ireland altogether. Poor girl! she has nourished a delusion for years, and it has embittered our intercourse and estranged me from her in a measure; all the same, I don't like the idea of paining her, and I shrink from the task of telling her."

"It's the eternal rain, and this enervating climate, that have done for us both," Frank grumbles. "Those infernal cars, too! I have been obliged to hold her on several times when the road has been rough; but we must go through with it now!"

"Look here, Forest," Bellairs says eagerly; "don't misunderstand me, I am a lucky fellow to have got Mrs. Durgan; she's a woman any man could love, and admire, and trust; she's one of the dearest and best of creatures; don't imagine for a moment that I don't perfectly appreciate her——"

"But you don't perfectly appreciate the luck of which you speak," Frank says.

They are certainly not too happy in their successful wooing—not too pleased with the

prospect of being the possessors ultimately of the ladies they are designing to wed. Success has not unduly elated either of them, and the mood in which they start to ride over to Breagh Place the day after Miss Grange made her successful coup near Bray, is a markedly depressed one. But their spirits rise under the influence of the exercise and the conviction that there is a positive necessity for facing this climax which is approaching.

There is something in the manner of the men which prepares the women, who know every expression of the faces before them, for what is to come.

“You have broken our compact, Harry,” Mrs. Durgan says reprovingly; “I can see you have.” Then, with a heightened colour, she puts her hand on his arm and pulls him down on to the arm of her chair, and whispers to him—

“You don’t know what mischief you have done, if you have made mention of an engagement that is very likely to be broken.”

He does not love, that is to say, he is not in love with the woman who says this, and with all the force of his passionate nature he does still love Kate Mervyn. Nevertheless, when Mrs. Durgan speaks of the possibility of the breaking of their engagement, that engagement suddenly becomes a dear and valued thing to him, and he resents the idea of any fracture occurring to it as indignantly and genuinely as if he had not been for weeks wishing to wake and find it all a mere chimera of the brain.

He has all a man's nervous dread of any one hearing anything about him that is detrimental to his dignity, or at all subversive of the idea that he is omnipotent with any woman with whom he desires to be omnipotent. In addition to this abstract aversion to being suspected of aught resembling failure, he has a special aversion to the possibility of Kate hearing that another woman, after holding him in the hollow of her hand for some time, can calmly speak of throwing him away, as if it were not an unlikely

contingency. These are his paramount sensations. Superadded to these is the human instinct which teaches us to keep every wound concealed.

A moment's observation of Kate and Frank convinces Bellairs that he need not fear detection from them. Frank is eagerly extenuating his own conduct, and trying to prove that Miss Grange's has been such as becomes a modest young maiden (on promotion) throughout; and Kate is listening to him in silence, with a pitying, sorrowful look on her face that damages Miss Grange in her lover's estimation, far more effectually than any words spoken in intemperate haste and anger could have done.

"You see," Frank is urging, "when a fellow can't get the woman he loves, it isn't good for him to live alone, so the only thing to be done is to take the woman who loves him."

"She does love you then; I am glad you feel that, Frank. Well, dear, all that

remains for me to say is, may you be very happy."

"You have no hard thoughts about me, Kate; bless you for that," he says; but in his secret soul he is rather hurt that she can so entirely renounce him as to have no "hard thoughts" of him, even when she hears that he is going to be married to some one else.

"Bellairs is in the same box," Frank says, with a little uneasy suspicion of being a trifle revengeful about something.

"In the same box? Do you mean that he is in love with Miss Grange, too?" she asks, kindling into real, womanly, jealous wrath in an instant.

"I mean that he is going to be married to Mrs. Durgan," Frank mutters, averting his eye from the face that is suffused for one moment by a crimson blush, and that pales the next, under the influence of what must be a most heart-sickening pang, to run the white flag up above the red in such a sudden way.

“Going to be married!” she says slowly. “Frank! you are not playing with me, are you? because you are shaking my trust in her, as well as in him——”

“Then you have been putting trust in him again, foolishly!” Frank half questions, half asserts; “it’s no use giving women lessons, however sharp and thorough they may be; they never profit by them. That Torquay business ought to have taught you to have guarded your heart against him again.”

“Why, Frank, I learnt it so badly that it didn’t even teach me to guard my heart against you, at one time,” she says, with just a touch of this newly-acquired bitterness of hers. Then she goes on to speculate in lowered tones—for the conversation between the other pair has nearly died away into silence—as to the reason why this reticence has been observed towards her; as to the motive that could be powerful enough to throw a shade of seeming falseness over one of the frankest souls that had ever

apparently belied itself, within Kate's experience.

"She had her reasons, be sure of that," Frank says caustically. He is not too well disposed towards the sex at present, and is quite inclined to attribute any amount of envy, hatred, malice, and double dealing to any mentioned member of it. The thought of his recently acquired Charlotte, and of all he will have to endure at her steady, composed, passive hands, stings him into feelings and utterances of injustice against the whole sisterhood.

"She had her reasons, and I don't think we have very far to look for them," he goes on, scanning Kate's changing countenance with angry eyes as he speaks. "I haven't met with the angelic woman in this world yet who would spare herself the pleasant spectacle of a sister-woman making a fool of herself. Mrs. Durgan was too sure of her own position with him to feel any alarm at the idea of your offering him the most potent flattery you could offer; she was

all right, she didn't care for your after-smarts."

There is no sympathy for Kate in either his words or his way, as he says all this. Further than this, there is no sympathy for her in his heart. In his estimation she has forfeited everything of that kind, both from himself and the world in general, by suffering affections to wander away in the direction of any other man than himself. True, her state smooths all difficulties of feeling on her account out of the way of his marriage with Charlotte; but he would have preferred a different process of smoothing altogether.

She likes him so well, so heartily and thoroughly still, in her generous, forgiving way, that it hurts her to fathom this ungenerous hardness on his part. There was nothing unwomanly, nothing forward nor unworthy, in her demeanour towards Captain Bellairs. It wounds her love of veracity, therefore, as well as her womanly pride, when Frank angrily assumes that there have been these reprehensible things,

and that he is sorry to be compelled to openly manifest his disapproval of them.

"We'll turn to the pleasanter topic of your engagement, Frank," she says quickly. "Let unrealities and vain imaginings alone, and tell me more about the happy reality you have achieved. When and where do you marry?"

"In London, I suppose," he answers, haltingly.

The pleasant topic will not get itself well and easily talked about, it appears. It is projected in a jerky way into their intercourse, and he is sensitively alive to the fact that Kate is aware that it is not the one about which his thoughts twine most tenderly.

"In London! among you all?" she replies softly.

"I don't know about that. My mother is rather queer, and Gertrude gets on the stilts without a moment's hesitation. She's going to be married to that fool, Clement Graham, you know, and she has it all her

own way (as the wealthy ones always have) with my mother just now. She may choose to think that I, being her brother, am making a bad match."

"If you never have the same thought it will matter very little what the rest of the world thinks," Kate says encouragingly. "I always like men who 'gang their ain gait' without veering about with every contrary opinion that may be wafted forth by their various friends."

"Whether he is right or whether he is wrong?" Frank questions; and when she says "Yes," he remarks discontentedly that he is as far as ever from knowing what she really thinks of Charlotte Grange.

He is obliged by the recognized forces of his condition to go off to Bray soon, and Captain Bellairs goes with him. There are a few constrained parting words spoken between the latter and Kate, but they tell either very little of the real state of the other's emotions.

"I ought to say something very pretty

to you about Frank," he says, "but the fact is, I can't think of anything excepting that I hope he will be happy."

"Thanks; that at least every one who knows him must hope," Kate answers.

"There's a good deal of risk in it."

"Yes, there's a good deal of risk in every marriage."

"She'll tone him down a bit. The exuberant spirit of youth won't be able to stand out against that depressing, stolid calm of hers."

"You're not too hopeful for him."

"I'm not too hopeful for any one in affairs of this kind. As far as I have seen, before the fatal day arrives one or other of the contracting parties awakes to a full knowledge of the folly he or she is about to commit."

"I mustn't detain you," Kate says nervously, in response to this. "Let me congratulate you, at any rate, and then—go."

He takes her hand and gives it a strong, long clasp. He looks into her eyes, with

eyes that are lighted by the fire of such passionate feeling for her, that it shocks and staggers her to remember that he is honour-bound to the powerless woman behind them, sitting there in her touching helplessness, watching this scene, which must be fraught with so much meaning for her. With a sudden despairing movement of the head, she withdraws her hand from his and whispers—

“Never think that I have a single hard thought of you ; weak as I have been, I have never been weak enough to look forward to a happier ending for myself than this.”

She passes down among the tall ferns and flowering plants as she says this, and goes out into the garden, out of earshot of the farewells which she fears are being interchanged behind her, hoping for one hour at least to herself in which to battle down, to defeat and kill the crowning misery of her life.

But the two men have not been gone five

minutes before a messenger comes from Mrs. Durgan, with a request that "Miss Mervyn will come to her at once."

When she goes, she is greeted with the words—

"Now, Kate, I'll have it out with you."

CHAPTER VI.

“THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.”

FRANK is back in town, engaged in the (to him) terrible task of “toning down” Mrs. Constable’s feelings about his new engagement. As fast as he assuages one fear, and lays it to rest as it were, another rises up strong and active, and his work recommences. Worse than all, he is unassisted in his endeavours. He has no one to back him up, and cheer his ofttimes fainting spirit. For there is a division in the family camp, and for the time being Mrs. Constable is at openly proclaimed war with her daughter, the successful general who has led Charlotte Grange’s forces on to victory. Accordingly Mrs. Grange has taken her husband and his sister away to her own home, leaving Frank

to fight the ignominious battle of self-justification alone.

He is paying a heavy penalty for all his want of purpose, all his weakness of will, all his contemptible inability to stand out against the machinations of the worst of the women who happens to be about him, already. His love of present ease, his intense, deeply rooted desire to keep things smooth for himself for the present moment, are taxed to the uttermost now. From the wails of his mother-in-law he can only turn to the withering words of wisdom of his mother, and the cool contentedness with which his sisters regard him as in a most pitiful position, and one for even tolerating which they are inclined to highly applaud themselves.

There is still more acid in Gertrude's views as to all things than there is in Marian's, although Gertrude's prospects are golden, gorgeous, grand in their security from all the evils flesh is heir to, when it has not money enough to supply its highest

needs. She is constantly mentally contrasting Frank Forest, her brother, the genius out of luck—as far as his natural selection of women with whom to share his life is concerned—with her lover Clement Graham, the fool who has by some rare chance secured her!

The contrast annoys her more day by day as she dwells upon it, and sours her originally not too sweet temper, and makes her morbidly desirous of finding out flaws in the woman Frank has chosen. But Charlotte Grange defies her! not openly, not impertinently, but with a quiet force that there is no withstanding. She is an amiable, plump, placid invader, to all appearances, and those whose territory she has invaded can divine nothing of her set, mercenary purpose, under her sneaking mantle of profoundly candid calm.

To give Charlotte Grange her due, hers is no easy part to play, and she plays it admirably. She is perfectly conscious of the family feeling against her, she is also perfectly conscious that the family feeling

is not altogether ungrounded. At the same time she determines to keep perfectly at peace, so long as they may have the power to frustrate any one of her aims. But as soon as she has Frank so securely for her own, that he must seem to take part in her conduct, whatever it may be, she will, with the most delicious candour, allow the family to understand her real opinion of it.

Meantime, she pursues her path unmolested among them all, compelling Mrs. Forest to advise her about her future arrangements for Frank's domestic comfort, and beguiling Gertrude into confidence about her trousseau, in a very feminine and pleasing way. She does not force herself upon the Forests, but just shows herself to be amiably gratified when they call upon her—as Frank compels them to do occasionally—and she takes very little notice of the baby, a course of conduct which is eminently pleasing to its father, after his late experiences.

In spite of all the hard bitterness of feeling which reigns in Gertrude's heart against this woman who is to be her brother's wife, a certain amount of confidence seems to spring up between them. Gertrude is not at all proud of Clement Graham, but she is well satisfied with the position she will be able to attain with the money which Clement Graham has in his possession. Charlotte openly congratulates Gertrude on this, and Gertrude relaxes some of her vigilant dislike under these congratulations, and so it comes about that the two brides-elect see a good deal of each other.

Verily there is a skeleton in the closet of every house—a bitter drop at the bottom of the most intoxicatingly successful cup. Clement Graham can give Gertrude a splendid house, and the use of vast wealth, but he cannot give her the safe feeling that he may not at any moment make a fool of himself, and abash her before her relations.

As in the old days, when he spoke to ill-

purpose and spoilt Kate Mervyn's life, Clement Graham still invariably intervenes at the wrong time, and interferes with the wrong person.

Just at present his fear is that Charlotte Grange is monopolizing too much of the time and attention of his own Gertrude, for Charlotte Grange to be at all a pleasant or acceptable fact to him. Despite his vast stock of self-love and self-complacency, Clement Graham cannot flatter himself that the ill-tempered, good-looking young woman who has consented to link her lot with his, likes him in the least, or regards him in the remotest degree. At the same time, she has accustomed him to a certain meed of attention, and he will have it from her now, though it vexes his soul to be obliged to exact it thus—to be compelled to entreat her to "seem, at least before other people, to think a little more of him, than she does of the make of her new dresses, and relative acceptability and worth of her various presents."

Gradually he develops a snappish antagonism to Charlotte Grange, on the few occasions of family gatherings, which would be "unbearable," she tells Frank, "if it were not so ridiculous." He differs with her on every subject that comes under public discussion. He makes taunting allusions to the audacity and forwardness of women who follow men up closely, and finally beguile offers from them, which the men, as a rule, repent themselves of most bitterly, before they can fulfil them. In a word, he rouses all the spirit of revenge which lies concealed in Miss Grange's soul, and makes her resolve upon taking a subtle form of it which will suit her purpose well.

She bears it all with a smiling, amiable patience, that commands a certain amount of admiration even from the Forest family, who (with the exception of Gertrude) dislike her intensely, but who cannot blind themselves to the fact that she is receiving more ignominious provocation from Clement Graham than a gentlewoman

ought to be subjected to at the hands of any man. The petty contradictions, the sneering allusions, the thinly veiled sarcasms, fall around her thickly, but she remains queen of herself, unbowed by them, unresentful of them.

At length, in sheer dismay at his want of success in irritating her, he desists, intending to maintain a sulky reserve and to ignore her utterly. But she will be no more ignored than she will be irritated by him. She creeps nearer to him daily, enveloping him in her influence as quietly and surely, as imperceptibly and fatally, as one is enveloped by the effects of a foul atmosphere.

He soon begins to find himself watchfully anxious for her coming, not in order that he may carp and cavil at her, as heretofore, but that he may listen to her interesting exposition of the enviable fate of a woman who marries a man with a "beautiful home in the charming country;" and who has the prospect of frequent foreign travel

before her. Now, both these delights will be Gertrude's; but Mr. Clement Graham's discrimination does not tell him that Charlotte is perfectly conscious of the fact. He imagines that she is groping in the dark, and that she has blindly hit upon, as more delightful than any other form of happiness in the world, those very circumstances of wealth with which he will be enabled to endow the happy woman who may become his wife.

It is difficult for the unbiassed few who are watching the game to determine whether or not Gertrude is pleased at the change in her future husband's demeanour towards her brother's future wife. As has been said before, Gertrude is not a good-tempered woman. On the other hand, it must be urged in her favour, that she is neither dishonest, treacherous, nor a sneak. But now, though she must see as plainly at least as Marian does, that Charlotte Grange is taking exceptionally subtle trouble to win Clement Graham's liking for her, if

not his love, Gertrude makes no sign. She is, or she feigns to be, perfectly indifferent. She withdraws no single mark of friendship or favour from Charlotte ; she exercises no supervision over Charlotte's intercourse with Mr. Graham ; she makes no attempt to outvie Miss Grange in the latter's eloquent delineation of the joys of a country place and foreign travel. In short, she either has the most profound reliance on her own charms, or on Charlotte's honour.

She is not dishonest. Long ago she stated, in reply to some questioning on the part of her sister, that she "did not like Clement Graham, but that she meant to marry him." Now, in reply to some further close questioning on the part of that keenly affectionate observer, she says—

"Don't be alarmed, Marian ; it must end as I intend it to end. Whether I'm taking a false step or not, in marrying him, I can't tell yet ; but certainly I shall take it."

"You don't quite know Charlotte, any

more than I do myself," Marian says; "she is taking incessant, fatiguing pains to please Clement."

"She takes incessant, fatiguing pains to please us all."

"Ah! that's natural; we might influence Frank. Clement is powerless to do that. I wouldn't rely on her desire to please the family at large, or on her honour, too much, if I were you."

"No; but I rely on his constitutional dislike to getting into hot water with any one who can punish him," Gertrude says coolly. "My dear Marian, don't imagine that I deceive myself about Clement: he's a moral and physical coward; but I shall never expect anything but moral and physical cowardice from him, and so I shall never be disappointed."

It is not an enthusiastic, it is not even a moderately hopeful view to take of her future relations with the man with whom it is her purpose to link her fate. But, then, the Forest girls are not of a specially

enthusiastic order, nor are they given to uttering their hopes aloud in the market-places. Marian's sole commentary on her sister's remark is—

"Well, I hope you're right; I suppose you are; I wonder what Frank thinks of the change from discord to harmony between Charlotte and Clement. We're such an amiable family in these latter days, that perhaps he likes it too."

"If he can make up his mind to be jealous of Clement Graham, I can't," Gertrude says; "it's Clement's nature to be either always stupidly surly or savage to people, or servilely pleased with them. As I mean to marry him I must put up with the idiosyncrasy; at any rate I'll never worry myself about it."

The subject drops here, and passes away from the thoughts of both sisters, apparently. As for the rest, they do not seem to notice it, and one day it is Charlotte herself who broaches it to Frank.

"I can't congratulate Gertrude on her

future lord and master," she says, coming out from a room in which she has been having a lengthy *tête-à-tête* with the subject of her remarks; "he may be wealthy, but he certainly isn't wise."

"I don't like the fellow myself, and never did," Frank says, remembering the part Clement Graham has played in the drama of Kate's life; "but that's neither here nor there; Gertrude likes him, I suppose."

"I suppose she does; nothing else but 'liking' would induce her to marry him, I should think?"

"Well, I don't know about that," Frank says, with touching candour as regards his sister's possibly mercenary motives; "Gertrude has always had a keen eye for the main chance; every happiness in life that money, and money alone, can give, will be hers when she marries him, if she only plays her cards properly."

"Money can't give much happiness if there's no love in the case, I should think,"

Charlotte says sweetly ; " poor Clement ! he's too weak to chain her heart, I fear. Do you know, Frank, that for days past he has been trying to make friends with me, evidently thinking that it won't look well to the world if he goes on showing contempt for me simply because I have no money of my own ; that is the secret of his dislike to me, I'm sure, and now he tries to conceal it."

" I shouldn't take any notice of the mean-spirited fool, if I were you," Frank says carelessly ; and Charlotte infuses still more sweetness and suavity into the tones in which she answers—

" Oh ! it's not worth while to bear malice ; he can't hurt me. I only mentioned it to you because I was afraid that you might think that I was vain enough to imagine that his altered manner arose from real liking on his part ; but believe me, Frank dear, I know better."

It is strange, at least, if not suspicious,

that the very day after this conversation she should be strolling alone with Clement Graham in one of the most secluded avenues in Kensington Gardens.

“I must admit to myself that I am doing wrong in meeting you in this way,” she says to him, as he comes up to her eagerly, “but my desire to be with you, and to listen to you, is stronger than my sense of right, stronger than my appreciation of all the advantages I should gain by keeping to my engagement with Frank.”

In his fatuous folly he really believes her: how indeed could he distrust such smiling, quiet, sweet, womanly eyes, and manners? He really believes her. He really thinks that she is ignorant of the immense worldly advantages he possesses over Frank Forest, and that she is here, risking her reputation and future comfort for love of himself alone.

“Gertrude either thinks it bad form to be demonstrative, or she has no feeling for me to express,” he says; “all the time she has never said as much as you’ve just

said to me, and a fellow gets very tired of it."

"They're a cold-hearted family, I fear," Charlotte Grange says, shaking her head.

"As for Forest, he can't blame us for changing our minds before we married," Clement Graham goes on; "he nearly did it himself two or three times before he married May Constable, I understand; I don't believe you would ever be happy with him."

"I don't believe I should—now," she replies.

"Then don't risk it," he urges, flushing up a little; "there's no need for us to make any fuss or to let it be known" (he grows pale again at the thought of the possible consequences of its being known); "we'll get it over quietly, and start off for Boulogne at once; we'll telegraph the intelligence to them from there, for I don't want to do anything underhand."

"I understand you so thoroughly," she says: and, to do her justice, she does.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. DURGAN "HAS IT OUT" WITH KATE.

"YOU'RE angry with me, and suspicious of me, now," Mrs. Durgan begins, as Kate, unwillingly enough, commences the task of listening to an explanation which she misguidedly thinks must be derogatory to herself.

"I am not angry with you," Kate answers. "There was no reason in law or nature why you should have selected me as your special confidant, and I'm not suspicious of you. Of course, you can trust Captain Bellairs so thoroughly that there was no need to watch me."

"I can trust him thoroughly, I do trust him thoroughly," the widow says quietly. "I know Harry so well, that I felt sure,

from the first, that he would be true to himself—and to you. He has always been honest to me. When circumstances compelled him to think that offering to marry me would be the kindest thing he could do for me, he did it; but he never deceived me. He told me, then, that he loved another woman better, but that mischievous fate forbade his marrying. He did not tell me that woman's name then, Kate; but, when you came, I knew that you were she, and I took the only course I could to secure your happiness and his."

"You have done evil that good may come," Kate says dejectedly; "and 'good,' in the way you mean, can't come of it. If I could take advantage of your generosity, if he could be ungenerous to you, how heartily he and I would despise, and very soon dislike, each other."

"And what do you think that I shall do," Mrs. Durgan asks, with very natural candour, "if I find that he and you urge each other on to try and make me marry

him? Why, I wouldn't do it for my own sake, putting you out of the question altogether—not that I can put you out of the question one bit—but even if I could. Oh, Kate, don't make me try to be reasonable about it; only believe that all my nature, all that's best in me, revolts against my taking any other course than this." "Which it half kills me to take," she adds to herself, but Kate does not hear the aside, and so is not pained at it.

It is such a difficult matter to explain this, that the settling of the sentimentally unpleasant business rests with Captain Bellairs and not with herself, that poor Kate feels inclined to lie down and let the whole thing drop. But Mrs. Durgan is one of the people who are comfortable and phlegmatic, to all appearances, for "a time," and who let things that are unpleasant in themselves "drop," only that they may pull them up in renewed health and unpleasantness hereafter.

"I must say something more before you

hand me over—a chattel, to be ‘rejected’ or ‘taken’ just as Captain Bellairs pleases,” Kate pleads in an agony of jealous, wounded pride. “You say it shall all be ‘so-and-so,’ and ‘so-and-so,’ to save my social standing! to win my social crown! And I say it shall not be so, for the sake of a footing that would be ten thousand times firmer even, for a crown enriched by jewels far finer than any that you or I could ever covet. It shall not be so, not because of its moral worthlessness! Georgie, I am not the woman to tell you that I would not take the lover who was mine before he was yours because the doing so would be morally wrong—but I am the woman to tell you that while I think a human being’s love so choice a boon that it is worth perilling the world’s opinion for, I think it so worthless a thing if it’s divided, that I’d give up the lover without a moment’s hesitation.”

“It’s not divided,” Mrs. Durgan asserts promptly; “it is not too pleasant a conviction, but I have the conviction upon me

strongly, that he has never had a particle of that sort of love for me. He has been affectionate to me, and thoughtful and considerate for me ; but he has never for a moment either felt passion or feigned it. Should I not be an unwise woman, should I not be wanting in common sense as well as common delicacy, if, knowing this truth well, I were to marry him ? ”

“ I won’t argue against your view of the case, I’ll only stand by my own,” Kate says resolutely ; “ inclination, love, folly, all urge me to be guided by you ; but to quote your own words, ‘ should I not be wanting in common sense as well as common delicacy ’ if I, knowing well what I do know about both myself and him, were to think of marrying him ? Moreover, he hasn’t asked me, nor shown the slightest inclination to do so.”

“ He has been tongue-tied by his pledge to me.”

“ He must remain tongue-tied to the end now, as far as I am concerned.”

"False pride, Kate. You're evidently preparing yourself to go considerably out of your way to make yourself and other people unhappy ; I won't injure his cause though by saying anything more about it. You only strengthen your obstinacy by your own arguments ; you feel bound to act up to every rash declaration you make, in order that you may seem to yourself to be consistent."

"I never tried to be consistent in my life," Kate says truthfully ; "only I don't want you in your generosity to force me to be mean ; besides," the girl continues, with a half laugh, "I needn't make a fuss about resisting temptation before it's put in my path. It's altogether unfortunate, altogether wretched, that you should have made discoveries, or rather, that I should have been weak, been honest enough to tell you anything ; but all the harm that shall be done is done. My happiness has been knocked about so, that if it were assured there would still be something wanting ; a thing that's

battered and worn out isn't worth patching up and putting a gloss on."

"How you like to play the part of a played-out person," Mrs. Durgan says, smiling. "You dare to do it, because your vitality asserts itself perpetually and proves to yourself and to every one about you that you have the power and the will to go on enjoying life at any moment that enjoyment is offered to you; it's different with me!"

"How?" Kate asks thoughtlessly.

"How!" the other rejoins sadly; "are you so accustomed to the sight of my sufferings, Kate, that you have ceased to see that they don't decrease? Why, your saying that makes me doubt that you love Harry as I would have him loved. If you were properly anxious and observant for him you would shrink (as I do) from the thought of his marrying a woman who promises to be a helpless incapable all her life."

"He'd be better mated even in that case," Kate says bitterly, "than he would be with a woman who had learnt to distrust both

him and herself; don't you understand? the time is past for us! If it were arranged smoothly now—if by any strange possibility I could be induced to believe that he wished it to be again all that it might have been so joyously long ago, something would occur to mar it, and I should have the misery of knowing that I had been accessory to the attempt at executing another failure."

"I am a fatalist, and I shall see you happily united to him yet, Kate," Mrs. Durgan says, with an air of bringing the conversation to an end, of which Kate is only too glad to avail herself.

It may be believed that Kate is infinitely—not "happier," perhaps, but—more at rest after this. The act of renunciation gives us firm ground whereon to take our stand, whereas we are on a quivering morass while we cling to the hope that something will occur which the slightest accident of fortune may render an impossibility—or at best a probability which can only be compassed at the cost of such humiliation, suspense, and

disappointment, as will render the prize a worthless one, even if it be gained eventually. On this firm, safe, hopeless ground, Kate takes her stand now, and feels that while she maintains her footing on it, she will be protected from those violent gales of intense emotion which hurled her hither and thither in the old days. Pain there may be in the situation, but there is also peace; and she has come to the pass now when cool, calm, peaceful pain is deemed by the sufferer to be preferable to the scorching, agonizing alternations of the fever of hope and despair.

A week or two passes, and no further attempt is made to undermine her resolution, either by Mrs. Durgan or Captain Bellairs. He comes to Breagh Place as frequently—rather more frequently, in fact—until his visits come to be looked upon as natural and inevitable daily events. His presence among them is not confusing to Kate, neither is it in the least degree painful. At sight of him, if no thrill of joy causes

her heart to throb, neither does any spasm of pain cause it to contract. As she has said herself, "the time is past" for these things; and she is perfectly at peace as regards the man she has taught herself to view as her friend's future husband. But the peace that is purchased at the price of love and hope—at the sacrifice of not daring to indulge in a single warmer wish than that rest and quiet may continue to be the portion of the one who makes the bargain—is apt to leave that saddest expression of all on a face, the look of fire too suddenly put out.

Meantime, her "work," which she intends shall be the chief object of her life now, absorbs her considerably, and progresses well. It is fast approaching completion now: and though the original plot and scheme of it have been altered by the circumstances which have surrounded her of late—though the unshaded plan of success which she had designed for her heroine, at starting, has been modified by her own recent experiences, she knows that her last

pages have greater breadth and strength, greater force and meaning, than her first ones. Sorrow and disappointment are splendid teachers, however reluctantly we may accept their lessons.

The quiet way in which these two women at Breagh Place take him for granted in their daily routine, beguiles Captain Bellairs into the belief that the subject mooted by his cousin at their last confidential interview is settled and done with, and that matters stand exactly where they stood before, between Mrs. Durgan and himself. He still regards himself as an engaged man, still vaguely imagines that "some day or other, when Georgie is all right again," they will marry in prosaic fashion, and settle down to live together, without being troubled by any nonsensical notions of any particular happiness resulting from the union. As for Kate, he hopes that about that time she will remove herself entirely out of his orbit; for though he has entirely relegated the idea of a marriage with her into the realms of

things that "might have been," he mistakes the peace that has come down upon her for indifference, and he does not care to have it brought under his observation.

Gradually the feeling of safety, and of everything being fixed and unalterable, deepens between them, and some of the old habits are resumed—some of the habits which Mrs. Durgan's rash appeal to Kate upset for a while. For instance, they ride together again without embarrassment, and speak freely of Frank, and of the pitiable weakness which has led him, against such better judgment as he has, into the error of this projected marriage with Miss Grange.

"It's a little your fault, you know," Bellairs always tells her; "if you had held up your hand even after that sketching humbug set in, she would have gone back as she came:" and Kate always makes the same reply—

"My conscience is sore enough on that point already; at any rate I should have done Frank more good than she will."

It is almost a pity—he feels it to be a cruel mistake, and a grave error of judgment—when Mrs. Durgan breaks the charmed spell of the feeling of security which has set in with them, by asking him one day, “How long is this to last?”

“It’s no use your pretending to misunderstand me, Harry,” she says, when he begins a question as to what she means. “I have a great gift of patience, but it’s hard to me to see you frittering away the chances of a happiness that is within your grasp. You and Kate Mervyn have loved each other long, and there’s nothing to come between you now——”

“Excepting that we don’t do so any longer,” he interrupts; “putting myself out of the question altogether, she has grown as indifferent to me as if we had never been anything but the most commonplace acquaintances.”

“Oh! you call that ‘indifference,’ do you?” Mrs. Durgan asks dryly; “I am glad I am not quite as dense as a man.”

"Besides," Captain Bellairs goes on arguing, "even if I were not looking forward to my marriage with you, Georgie, as about the very best thing that could happen to me, the other business would be a bad one ; warmed-up affections lack the freshness that was their charm before the fire ever went out of them. Kate being a woman, might imagine that I ought to renew all the wild emotions of my youth at her shrine, whereas a hearty regard for her would be all that I should be able to achieve, even if I were justified in endeavouring to achieve anything."

Then Georgie Durgan tells him very clearly, and decidedly very gravely, but without any morbid exhibition of sorrow and regret, that he is justified in doing exactly as he pleases in the matter. She makes him understand that she herself can never be his or any man's wife. She pleads to him for Kate, from the almost sacred ground of her own terrible affliction. "Before I knew Kate," she says, "I let

myself hope and pray that I might be the one to give you the most perfect happiness. That prayer has not been answered, that hope has been crushed out of my heart ; let me at least feel that even in my helplessness I may be the means of furthering your happiness in another direction. Bring hope back to Kate's heart, and the shadow of what you mistake for indifference will roll away quickly enough."

He is touched by her generous unselfishness, he is thrilled by her confident allusions to Kate's easily reawakened love. But he is not yet convinced that he will be a wise man if he listens to her arguments.

"It is definitely understood between Harry and myself that we are not going to be such wicked fools as to marry," Mrs. Durgan says to Kate this night.

"Then I suppose we shall not see him here again," Kate says.

"I fondly hope that we shall see him here more often, even, than ever ; but that

depends on the will of another, and not on mine."

"I can't believe (of course I know what you mean) that anything can end well that has been brought about by a series of such violent wrenches," Kate says nervously.

"You have administered a good many of the wrenches to yourself, my dear," Mrs. Durgan replies; "thank Fate and your friends for straightening some at least of the wry places in your life."

CHAPTER VIII.

“CAN FRANK AFFORD IT?”

MISS FOREST is not afflicted with the keensightedness of love, but she has such a keen eye for the main chance, that very few things that immediately concern herself escape her observation. At the same time she is not endowed with a mean-spirited or underhand nature. Charlotte Grange recognizes these characteristics of her future sister-in-law clearly and comprehensively, and—being Charlotte Grange—acts accordingly.

No one who sees her at this juncture can imagine that the fair, gentle woman, who goes on making her preparations so placidly for her approaching marriage with Frank, is in reality poising herself upon the brink of a precipice every day, and is, further, in

mortal dread of falling over it. If Clement Graham should be premature—if she herself should be unguarded for an instant—if, in fact, the explosion occurs one moment before it would be well for it to occur, she, and not the others, will be blown up and irretrievably ruined.

All these considerations cause Charlotte Grange to walk with even more than her customary caution and discretion in these days. Full well does she realize the truth of the old adage, that a "bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Nevertheless, the song of the bird she has in her hand is so flat and tame in comparison with the warblings in which the one in the bush indulges as to country places and all the appurtenances thereof, and to foreign travel, and all the joys that foreign travel may bring to a pretty, captivating woman who likes to captivate.

Still, in spite of the dazzling vista opening to her view, Miss Grange goes on her way warily, watching her opportunity for

putting in a word that may be detrimental to Gertrude particularly, or to the Forest family generally, with the subtle skill that women who listen behind curtains are capable of evincing. We cannot say in the words of the great German poet, that she is "like a star unhasting, unresting," for there is something pure, clear, and above the sordid interests of the world in a star. But she is as "unhasting" as phlegmatic-natured creatures of the lower world usually are, and as "unresting" as the dry rot.

Gradually, as the day draws nearer and nearer for these double marriages to be perpetrated (it is difficult to avoid speaking of such unions as if they were crimes), she withdraws herself more and more from the social family gatherings which Frank labours so strenuously to organize. Common sense justifies her in acting thus. Family gatherings, as a rule, are the most depressing of social errors, and the gatherings that are convened for the purpose of inaugurating a new order of things in the

way of matrimony, and of introducing new members into the clan, are the most depressing of all. Nevertheless, the Forests feel that it is a daring and a suspicious thing when the new member, whom they have been so ready to black-ball, is the one who shows herself almost indifferent to the joys, and advantages, and terrors of the club.

She is fighting a double fight, to tell the truth, for her heart and taste are at variance with her keen, inborn, and carefully-cultivated sense of what is expedient. Clement Graham's meannesses and smallnesses are of a different order to her own, and so are especially revolting to her. He has a habit of relating the prices that have been asked of him for articles that he has eventually, after much haggling, procured at a lower rate. He schemes small economies, and laughs over them, in a self-satisfied way, in a minor key. He quotes his own narrow experiences of the world, and seems to proclaim them as infallible.

He makes mistakes in speaking of topics that are public property. He is grossly ignorant of politics, of literature and art, and of everything, in fact, that is outside the service he has left. In a word, he is a petty-minded, ignorant, conceited, mean man. But for all that, both Gertrude Forest and Charlotte Grange mean to marry him.

He has not shown himself mean, however, as far as the value of the love gifts which he has bestowed upon Gertrude is concerned. Looking upon jewellery as property, and sensibly reflecting that he can at any time after their marriage take them from her and turn them into cash again, he has loaded Miss Forest's fingers with rings, and her arms with bracelets of price. These things represent his wealth, and his power of being munificent; and though he refers to them constantly, and makes Gertrude and all her family feel that he is perfectly conscious of his own extreme liberality, he does not regret having given them—for will not they be his own again?

In the days of his dislike to Miss Grange, it had been pleasing and soothing to him to see that Frank did not lavish the same sort of pledges of affection upon Charlotte. But now that the dislike has given place to a feeling that he believes to be genuine, heaven-ordained love, it pains him to see the plump white fingers and arms, which are a part of the creature he worships, unadorned.

"He doesn't spend much of his money on you," Mr. Graham observes to Charlotte one day, as they saunter round the precincts of the Old Kensington Palace; "those flat, plain gold rings are cheap enough to be given away as parting gifts to faithful servants, and people of that sort. I should never have thought of offering one to you as our engagement ring."

The whole tone of the sentiment is coarse, and Charlotte hates him for it. Nevertheless she sighs to see the flashing diamond and the changeful opal on her own fair fingers and well-rounded arms.

“In any case I should think more of the giver than of the gift,” she says; “but a poor ring can’t bind the heart more than a rich one, can it, Clement?”

“You said the other day that you liked opals above everything,” he rejoins hurriedly, dragging a little case out of his pocket. “I’ve got the whole set for you, but I have only brought the ring out as a specimen; throw that thin poor little bar of gold away, and put this on instead.”

She puts it on, her heart beating triumphantly the while. They are fine opals, and they flash out a variety of colours, as she holds her hand out to him to see the effect. Altogether it is a most pleasing earnest of what is to come.

“You must keep that on now,” he says, as he looks at his own gift with an appreciative eye. He longs to tell her what the set cost, but he does manage to restrain himself, though with much difficulty.

“If I wear it, questions will be asked,” she says. “Frank is so unobservant of such

things, that my fingers might be covered with rings, and he'd never see them ; but his sisters would see it at once, and with true Forest feeling, would grudge me the possession of anything prettier than has fallen to their share."

"Just such another ring has fallen to Gertrude's share, let me tell you," he says, in a tone of annoyance. "I gave her four rings when we were engaged, and I don't know how many since. I'm glad I didn't give her a whole set of opals ; they're deuced expensive, you know, and she may stick to the presents when the engagement is broken off."

"She may : the Forests are not to be relied upon in any matter of delicate feeling," Charlotte says, shaking her head and looking as mournful as if the Forests' iniquities had caused her much tribulation.

"I say, Charlotte, whatever made you accept the fellow?" Clement Graham asks grumblingly. Infatuated as he is, he cannot blind himself to the fact that to all appear-

ances Charlotte had been very well pleased with her position, and very well satisfied with her lover.

She looks up at him plaintively, and shakes her head. "You forget that I had not seen you then," the arch-hypocrite murmurs. "I have had another standard since I knew you, Clement. Don't be harsh in your judgment of my errors of judgment before that time."

In his vast belief in his own superiority to any and every man who has not as large an income as himself, Clement Graham never doubts for a moment that she is uttering words of singleness and truth.

"Poor girl!" he says patronizingly; "it's an awful sell for you that you should have been let into the engagement, and it would have been worse still if you hadn't been saved from the marriage. For my own part, I shall be glad now when the explosion is over and we are free to please ourselves."

"So shall I," she says, with a little shiver

that is partly real and partly affected ; " but there will be a good many difficulties to surmount before we are ' free,' as you say. The Forests cling tenaciously to their own interests, and love money from the very bottom of their hearts."

It is on the tip of his tongue to say, " Frank didn't show himself to be very sordid when he proposed marrying a penniless girl like you ;" but he fears that Charlotte may take the reminder amiss, and he does not desire to offend her at all, for he is getting to rely very much on her subtle flatteries.

" I suppose Gertrude has said a good deal to you about the figure she'll make when she has my money to spend ?" he says ; and Charlotte answers regretfully—

" Oh yes, it has been terrible to me to hear a mere girl speaking of it, as if it were the sole aim and object of marrying at all. I can't feel remorse about having won your heart from her, Clement, for I don't believe she prized yours or gave you hers in return ;

it was just a question of so many pounds, shillings, and pence with her."

"By Jove! she'll find the difference when, instead of the allowance I should have made her, she'll have to go back to her mother's pettifogging little pocket-money," he says exultantly; "she'll find the difference then."

"I wonder what the allowance was?" Charlotte thinks. "If he tells me, he will be ashamed to make mine less when we are married." Then this disinterested young woman remarks—

"Gertrude has very extravagant views. She has spoken before me of the allowance you proposed, but I confess I did not get the impression of its being——"

She stops in apparent embarrassment, and appears sorry that she has been led on to say so much.

"She didn't give you the impression of its being liberal, you were going to say, only you don't like to," he cries eagerly. "Well, Charlotte, when I tell you that I proposed

allowing her four hundred a-year for herself, I don't know what you'll call it ! ”

“Most munificent !” Charlotte says in an ecstasy ; and in saying this she overshoots her mark, for he at once makes up his mind that she has not expected half as much, and that therefore he shall only allow her two hundred a year, and will expect a perennial stream of gratitude to flow from her for it.

Their plans are nearly matured now. They have been altered and modified very considerably since the first blush of the affair. Mr. Clement Graham has been taught by Charlotte to consider her worth the price of a special license, and they have settled that they will be married in one of the City churches, and then go away at once to the sanctuary of their own home. From that sanctuary Clement feels that he will have courage to telegraph the intelligence of their nuptials to the family they are tricking. He is only deferring the happy day, out of the natural repugnance every man has to proclaiming himself a scoundrel.

“They have asked me to dine with them to-night,” Charlotte tells him presently, shrugging her shoulders, “and Frank will be there, talking of what he will do when he’s settled again, and has dislodged Mrs. Constable ; altogether it will be most trying. I hope you won’t be there, to be pained too ? ”

“I’m asked, and I suppose I must go, or they’ll think it odd,” he says.

The fact is, Miss Grange has hung such chains about him, that he cannot shake them off. Wherever she is he desires to be, especially if Frank is present also. For jealousy has stepped in to Charlotte’s aid, and Clement Graham cannot endure either to witness or to picture the privileged caresses which Charlotte makes him believe Frank is perpetually bestowing upon her.

On their side, the Forests are not much more elated at the idea of the family gathering which is to take place round their hospitable board this night, than are the pair who are stealing a march on them.

"I shall be glad when they are all married, and the necessity for these abominably dull and expensive little dinners is over," Mrs. Forest says to Marian.

"Frank, for the first time in his life, is weak," Marian laughs; "he thinks that the more we see of Charlotte, the better we shall like her. Now, Gertrude never commits that egregiously foolish mistake about her bargain."

"If Gertrude doesn't rule that man absolutely from the very first, she will lead a miserable life with him," Mrs. Forest says. "There is no lot so hard as that of the wife of a fool who has found out that he can have his own way."

"We had better not interfere, or advise," Marian rejoins. "He'll be bad enough for Gertrude to endure, but Charlotte will be harder for Frank."

"There is a certain amount of sweetness about Charlotte," Mrs. Forest says, deprecatingly.

"I detest such sweetness; she'll talk to

one person with that cloying smile of hers upon her face, and all the time her eyes are straying away in search of the impression she may be making upon other people. I wonder what poor Kate thought of her ! ”

“ I wish I could hear that Kate was happily married,” Mrs. Forest says wistfully. “ The thought of her wandering about, now here, now there, without any settled home, embitters my life.”

“ Oh, Kate’s one of those people who always light on their feet,” Marian says hopefully, for she does not wish her mother to come to the family gathering in a depressed frame of mind.

They find Gertrude playing hostess to Charlotte in the drawing-room. Miss Grange is the first to arrive. Her opal ring is on her finger, and she sees that Gertrude’s eyes light on it instantaneously.

“ The twin to mine,” Miss Forest says, holding out her own hand.

“ Yes ; but I have the whole set, brooch,

bracelet, earrings, necklet, and all," Charlotte replies triumphantly.

A shadow darkens Gertrude's face. She has quite regard enough for her brother to feel sorry that he should be spending his substance on this grasper; and besides, she feels a little annoyed at Charlotte outshining her in the matter of the opals.

"Can Frank afford it?" she asks rather sharply; and Charlotte says, insolently—

"Take my advice, and don't question him on the point, my dear. He does not bear interrogation on such matters well, even from me."

"I am not in the habit of interrogating my brother about his private business," Gertrude says coldly; and Charlotte feels with satisfaction that her galling warning has saved her from exposure for a time. As Gertrude's will is potent in the family just now, there will be nothing said about the set of opals in public. As for Frank's curiosity in private, "I'll baffle that through his vanity," she thinks complacently; "and

if I can't, and he will have an explanation, why Graham will be compelled to show a little courage for once in his life, that is all."

She hardly realizes yet, that relying on Graham's courage in any emergency is about as insecure a proceeding as relying on the false light the will-o'-the-wisp shows.

CHAPTER IX.

CISSY ONCE AGAIN !

“WHAT ‘a laggard in love’ you are, Harry !” Mrs. Durgan says, with impetuous zeal, to her cousin one day, when he comes back to her after a long ride with Kate, and answers, in reply to some eager questioning, that he has not said anything which directly or indirectly can be construed into a declaration to Kate.

“The fact is, the bloom is off the rye,” he confesses.

“Nonsense ! she’s as beautiful in person, and as bright in mind, as she can ever have been,” she rejoins.

“Yes, she’s all that, but somehow or other the keenness of my appreciation for her beauty and her brightness is worn off.

My heart remained very faithful to her during all those years when she was inaccessible ; now that she's accessible I am conscious of being in a lowered temperature about her."

"Yet it has not wandered to any other woman ?" she half asks, half asserts.

"You're right there ; in fact I love her still in reality, but the glow is gone from it, and Kate's a girl to detect that directly, and to suffer from it, and to wear her own soul out first in efforts to rekindle it, and then in punishing me and herself when those efforts fail."

Mrs. Durgan heaves a tired sigh.

"The truth is, Harry," she says, "that you'll never be happy apart, and you'll never be as happy together as you thought you ought to be in the first flush of your love's young dream."

"It's exactly that ; what on earth shall I do without her ? but, on the other hand, what on earth should I do with her ? I love her still, and it still would be the greatest

happiness I could know to make her my wife ; but I should disappoint her at every turn, and hers is not a nature to bear pain and disappointment."

"Taste the greatest happiness, and don't fear your fate too much," Mrs. Durgan counsels ; and he cannot help feeling that if he had only been in love with her, she would have suited him much better than Kate, who will expect so much more of him.

However, inclination, propinquity, a certain craving to know whether or not she is still passionately attached to him, and above all, that admiration for her which he has never cast out, all impel him on, and he pleads to her to give him her heart and hand, as ardently as if he had never thought that such pleading would be unwise.

There is something sadly prophetic in the way she answers him.

" ' Love you still,' Harry ! yes, more than ever—why shouldn't I tell you the truth ?—more than ever ! But it will end badly, it's resuscitating a corpse."

He laughs away her fears, for he is a man who quickly throws aside an impression, whether it be pleasant or the reverse; and since he has brought himself up to the point of putting it to the touch, he has not feared his fate too much.

“I suppose it won’t all be ‘blue unclouded weather’ with us any more than it is with other people,” he says, “but we have a very fair prospect before us, Kate. After all, we have stuck to each other through a good many trials——”

“You will persist in affecting to forget that there have been interludes,” she interrupts. “We shall never be exactly as we should have been to one another if we hadn’t cared for other people in the mean time.”

“You’re a better lover than philosopher, Kate,” he laughs, but in his heart he thinks, “I wish she wouldn’t be so ready with her recollections; I’m quite willing to take things as they are, and to be perfectly happy and contented with them. We ought to leave the longing for the impracticable and

the impossible to younger and less experienced people."

It is always a bitter drop in her cup to a woman, when her lover not only remembers that she is older than she was, but words his remembrance of the fact: and Captain Bellairs has an unhappy knack of doing this very often in the most unintentional way.

"On the whole I think it's a lucky thing for us both that circumstances compelled us to wait and sober down, and have done with the follies of youth before we came together," he says to her, one day, while their engagement is still quite a new thing.

"Yes, so do I," Kate says, with that remarkable promptitude which is not at all the offspring of an acquiescent, but rather of a wounded, spirit. "For my own part, I feel awfully old, much too old to have anything to do with the folly of marrying at all."

"We have neither of us grown younger," he says sententiously, and the observation

is not one tended to soothe the lovingly anxious spirit of an over-sensitive woman.

“We are neither of us made exactly of the stuff to ‘wear well,’ as people call it,” he goes on; “we neither of us belong to the lymphatic order of beings, and you especially intensify every emotion to such a degree that it must tell on you physically. Now, that stolid creature Frank is going to marry will wax smoother and fatter, but she’ll never have any lines of passion or of pain for any one but herself drawn on her fair face.”

“I know, from the way in which you speak, that you dislike that type as much as I do, Harry,” she says; and she feels consoled in a measure for his vivid recollection of Time having been a thief, and having robbed her of her freshest youth, by his scarcely veiled repugnance to the creaseless “well-liking” beauty who has tricked Frank into an engagement.

On his side he is rather pleased with the way in which he has expressed his impres-

sion of Miss Grange. It must be understood that Captain Bellairs is not a dogmatic man, nor is he a man addicted to the habit of speaking as if he were speaking to an audience. But he is human, and he likes to feel that when he talks well he is listened to with attention by some one who is capable of giving a verdict on both the matter and the manner of his speech.

“There’s another woman I could mention who will never burn herself up,” he goes on. “Cissy Angerstein will keep that pretty childishly flexible face to the end, and only look like an aged baby when she’s eighty.”

“I wonder what has become of her?” Kate says meditatively. “Poor Cissy! we were so very much thrown together such a little time ago, and now we’re nothing more to each other than if we had never suffered, and sorrowed, and cried, and laughed together; the reflection bothers me sometimes, Harry.”

“Rest assured it never bothers Cissy,” he says, laughing. “My dear Kate, don’t

look vexed ; it is weakness to be wrath with weakness. Cissy Angerstein hasn't the power of feeling strongly for anybody who isn't conducing to her immediate comfort ; we can no more censure her for the flaw than if she had been born blind, or deaf, or dumb. She hasn't the faculty, and you have it, that's all."

"That's all," Kate assents.

"It makes her very easy to deal with," he goes on. "Provided you give her everything that conduces to her own comfort or pleasure, she's happy."

"In fact, if every desire of her heart is gratified, she's satisfied."

"Precisely so."

"But, Harry," Kate goes on, feeling irresistibly impelled to argue the point, "how can you extol or even tolerate such unmitigated, unreasonable selfishness ?"

"I don't extol it ; I have simply accepted it as the prominent characteristic of the case I undertook to guard some years since, as I have told you."

"Hers is such an exacting nature," Kate says, thinking and speaking more petulantly about Cissy Angerstein than she had ever suffered herself to think and speak before.

"Well, yes it is," Captain Bellairs admits blithely. "Odd you should have said that of her to-day, for I've had a letter from her this morning, in which she prefers a most peculiar request."

"Yes?" Kate interrogates, trying not to let her tone sound too anxious.

"It's one that I don't exactly see how I can refuse to grant," he goes on. "I can't plead want of space, or want of means, or any other insurmountable barrier. The fact is, poor Cissy has come to the end of her resources very nearly, and she wants me to let her come and live in some little house on my estate, as she understands she can live for nothing in Ireland."

He looks questioningly at Kate as he tells her this, and Kate discerns at once that he has no repugnance to the plan.

"And you have told her——?" Kate

begins : then she pauses and leaves him to supply the remainder of the sentence.

“ I have not written to her yet ; I waited to consult you. For my own part I see no objection to the plan ; I could let her have that pretty little place belonging to the home-farm at Lugnaquilla, and could look after her and see——”

“ That she has every comfort and pleasure she may set her heart upon,” Kate puts in coldly.

“ Exactly,” he says, in utter unsuspicion.

“ Does she know of our engagement ?”

“ Her letter is partly an answer to one which I wrote to her announcing the fact.”

“ Any message to me ?”

“ No,” he says laughingly. “ Just like Cissy that, to leave out the very point which she ought not to have omitted. She’s thinking too much of her own pecuniary difficulties, I fancy, to have much thought for other people.”

Kate rides on in silence. Of what can he be thinking, to have so little regard for

her comfort and happiness, as to contemplate planting this Cissy Angerstein close to Lugnaquilla as her (Kate's) nearest neighbour? Her heart swells with wrath that is partly jealous, and partly just, and wholly human.

"Well, dear, what do you think about it?" he asks presently, in a cheerful tone, that shows he is utterly unobservant of the shadow of gloom that has fallen upon her.

"Consult the dictates of your own judgment and heart, entirely without reference to me," she says, making an effort to be cheerful and magnanimous. "As, you say, it has fallen to your lot to be Cissy's guardian, you must be true to your trust in the way you think best."

"I have been that always, thank Heaven!" he says, frankly. "Whatever mistakes poor Cissy may have made, I have never aided her in the commission of one of them."

She believes him thoroughly: believes

most earnestly and implicitly in his honour and integrity. Nevertheless, she does wish that he did not deem that he was fulfilling his duty towards Cissy in the best and kindest way, by having her at the pretty cottage on the Lugnaquilla home-farm.

She mentions the subject casually, and with well-affected indifference, to Mrs. Durgan, by-and-by.

“ I shall have my old friend, Mrs. Angerstein, as my nearest neighbour at Lugnaquilla. Has Harry told you that she’s going to live on the home-farm ? ”

“ Good gracious ! No,” Mrs. Durgan replies. “ Why, I thought that woman was one of those pestilently selfish creatures whom all sensible people would keep at a distance, if possible. What has induced you to bring her upon yourself ? ”

“ I didn’t want her,” Kate says, wincing. “ Can’t you understand ?—She has asked for a home. She has asked to come to Lugnaquilla ; and what can he do, and what can I say ? ”

“ He had far better make her an allowance, and keep her the other side of the Channel. I should say exactly the same if she were his widowed, helpless, and most disagreeable sister ; and Cissy Angerstein is not his sister. These family arrangements never answer. If you don’t like to speak to Harry I will.”

“ I shall certainly never say a word about it,” Kate says.

“ Then I shall,” Mrs. Durgan replies. “ Don’t think that I will speak as your mouthpiece, Kate ; I’ll tell him what an idiot he is, right out from myself, on my own responsibility.”

“ I’m sure he’s doing it for the best,” Kate says ; “ but I honestly confess I don’t like the anticipation.”

“ And you’ll like the reality even less. Now, Kate, if I were in your place” (her cheeks flush as she says this, for she remembers how very recently she has been in Kate’s place) “ I’d tell Harry out openly that I didn’t like it. Don’t do it sentiment-

ally ; but tell him that it will be a bore to you to have a whining, weeping widow at your door when you can do just as well for her afar off."

"Things must take their course," Kate says ; "if I said that to Harry, he would remind me that we had passed the golden age of romance, and had entered the leaden-hued one of common-sense and expediency ; besides, he seems to think it expedient that Cissy should come."

"Resignation is an admirable quality ; but resignation to a perpetual nuisance that you can avert, is nonsense," Mrs. Durgan says. "However, it's useless saying any more to you. But I will speak to Harry !"

Accordingly she speaks to Harry that very day, launching out into the subject with her customary fearlessness.

"Kate has been telling me about Mrs. Angerstein. What wild plans men make and carry out if they are not liable to feminine supervision !"

“You don’t like the plan, then? Kate does.”

“Oh! does Kate? Well, I won’t drag Kate’s name into the discussion, but I’ll tell you openly I don’t. This Cissy Angerstein has been as fetters on your feet ever since you undertook the charge of her, and now you want to plant her down at Lugnaquilla and make her a yoke on your wife’s neck!”

“My dear Georgie, be reasonable,” he says in that magnificent tone of mental superiority which the best and most delightful of men are apt to indulge in at times. “Poor Cissy has come to the end of the wretched pittance left her by her husband, and I must do something for her, and see after her. Now it’s easier for me to do something for her, and to see after her here at Lugnaquilla, than if she were at a distance. While I was unmarried I couldn’t do it.”

“And now that you’re going to be married you oughtn’t to do it.”

He laughs very good-temperedly. "You women have such absurd notions," he says. "I have another and more cogent reason still to give you in favour of the plan; I'm bound to maintain the poor thing and her children, and the Lugnaquilla coffers are not absolutely overflowing. As a married man I shall have to keep up a very different establishment, and altogether live more expensively than I do now. If she's at our very gates I shall hardly feel the additional expense of her little *ménage*, but it would be a different thing if she were living elsewhere. Killing sheep and pigs as we do constantly at Lugnaquilla, and with that tremendous stock of poultry to fall back upon whenever she feels inclined, Cissy won't know what a butcher's bill is."

"I can say nothing against your argument; if you can't afford to keep her anywhere else, and can afford to keep her luxuriously on the Lugnaquilla home-produce, 'at your gates,' as you say, then it would be cruel on my part to inter-

fere further—cruel at least to Mrs. Angerstein.”

“I am glad I have convinced you,” he says affectionately. “I want to see all you women friendly and happy together. The children are dear little things, and poor Cissy, in spite of her foibles, has a very affectionate nature.”

“You dear, generous, unwise fellow!” his cousin says, shaking her head at him. But he is too well pleased and satisfied with the way the matter has arranged itself, to ask her in what way she thinks him unwise.

“I shall write to Cissy Angerstein to-morrow, Kate, and tell her she needn’t bother herself any more,” Captain Bellairs says to Kate that night. “I’ll tell her you’ll see to any alterations that may be needed, and overlook the furnishing, and then she’ll rest satisfied that it will all be done tastefully and well.”

“If I were Kate I should just let Mrs.

Angerstein come and exert her own lazy, lymphatic little mind about it all herself—if she is to come,” Mrs. Durgan says.

But Kate only bows her head and answers,

“As you please, Harry.”

CHAPTER X.

BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER !

“As our dear Kate is going to marry so brilliantly and happily, she may think it very unkind of us if we abstain from writing to wish her well,” Mrs. Forest says to her daughters one morning, when they have finished reading Kate’s letter announcing the fact.

“She might have thought it equally unkind of us to abstain from writing to wish her well if she had been going to marry badly and miserably,” Marian says; “but you’re right, mamma! it’s the one marriage in the family from which we may expect good things.”

“Wishing joy on such occasions is utter nonsense,” Gertrude says pettishly; “we

shall each and all have our allotted share of good and evil ; I for one expect so little of what some people would call happiness, that whatever comes (unless it's poverty) I can't be disappointed."

"That's what I call facing the unknown in a proper spirit," Marian says, laughing. "To tell the truth, I don't fancy that Charlotte is much more enthusiastic."

"Frank is a man to inspire love in any girl, remember," Frank's mother observes.

"How ridiculously extravagant Frank is getting," Gertrude says seriously ; "did you see that ring he has given her ? It's like mine, and she tells me she has the whole set."

"Frank didn't give it to her," Marian explains in surprise ; "surely she told you that."

"All she told me was, not to question Frank about it, as he bore interrogation badly ; as if I were addicted to idle curiosity ! Her caution was another proof of her want of tact."

"Another proof of her tact, I think,"

Marian says ; " only she should have warned the family all round, and fettered the fraternal tongue. I spoke to Frank about that ring, and he knew nothing about it."

" As she is to be our brother's wife, it will be as well not to question her about every bit of jewellery she may put on," Gertrude says scornfully. " She's just the woman to get presents from every man she meets ; she's a wily, luring woman, and one doesn't suspect her until one finds her out, because she's so fair and placid."

" You rather liked her at first," Marian says, in some surprise ; " have you found her out ?"

" Yes," Gertrude says contemptuously ; " she's trying hard to get Clement now, and she thinks that I am blind to it all because I make no sign."

" Perhaps it is your natural jealousy of any portion of his attention being given to any one else, that makes you think this ?" Mrs. Forest says languidly. " I am sure Clement scarcely treated her with common

civility at first, and even now he hardly takes any notice of her."

"Jealousy!" Gertrude echoes. "Dear mamma, if I liked Clement Graham well enough to feel jealous of any other woman on his account, I should pity myself profoundly, I assure you."

"But we were talking about Kate," Marian says; "who's to write to her, mamma?"

"I think, considering the very advantageous match she's going to make, that it would not be amiss if we all wrote to her. I did hope to have had him for a son-in-law at one time," Mrs. Forest adds, as Gertrude quits the room, "but as it is, we must not forget what is due to my only brother's only daughter."

"No, we have forgotten that too long," Marian says seriously. "Mamma, if I were Kate, I should return my relatives' letters, with the one little remark that their kindness came too late."

"Kate won't do that."

“No, Kate won’t do that, she’s too——”

Marian stops, and Mrs. Forest asks—

“Too what?”

“Too strong, mamma; she must feel that we have all been so ‘little’ to her, that it would seem to her like breaking a butterfly on the wheel, to revenge herself on us in the smallest degree.”

“I should like her to be married from here, the same day the others are,” Mrs. Forest says meditatively, ignoring Marian’s last remark. “It would be the fitting and proper thing that she should go from her own aunt’s house.”

Meantime there has been a little conversation on the subject of the much-discussed ring, between Frank Forest and his betrothed. He is not a weakly curious man, nevertheless it does excite a certain amount of desire to know about it in his mind, when he sees this ring flashing forth its myriad hues on the same finger whereon he has placed his plain bar of gold as a pledge of his engagement to her.

"That's a very pretty ring," he says, taking her hand up to examine it more closely. He has just strolled in this morning to pay her one of his very brief visits—brief because he cannot constrain himself to stay long in Mr. Grange's house.

"Yes, they're very fine," she says quietly ;
"I like opals better than anything."

"One of the wedding presents ?"

"I suppose I may say yes."

He will not directly ask her who gave her the ring, but he looks as if he would like to know, and Charlotte marks his looks, and laughs within herself at the idea of what he would feel if she told him.

"Your sister Gertrude is evidently surprised at my having any friends well enough off to give me anything beyond the value of sixpence," she laughs. "You should have seen her blank stare of amazement when I told her I had the whole set, necklet, bracelets, earrings, brooch, everything."

"You have the whole set ?"

"Yes, and it's superb," she says, and her

face lights up with a gleam of genuine, ardent love for the jewels.

“Your friend—whoever he or she may be—is very generous ; I hope several more of the same sort will turn up and treat you with equal liberality when you’re married.”

He says this carelessly, and his unconcern is not feigned. He is not at all jealous of his Charlotte. Remembering how very hard she tried to win him, he cannot think that she will lose him lightly. After the manner of confiding man, he trusts the wrong woman in the wrong place.

Presently she startles him by saying—

“Your family are hardly behaving to me in a way that is calculated to make me eager to become a member of it, Frank ; your mother and sisters are civil—just civil—because you are here to enforce civility from them ; but I have never had a line of congratulation from your Cousin Kate. I suppose Captain Bellairs and you mean to keep up friendly relations ? Between you, you ought

to insist upon her being commonly courteous to me."

Frank gives a grunt. Feminine quarrels are things to which he has a peculiarly strong distaste. He has a theory about everything that is a little out of joint righting itself, if only there is no undue interference. He also has a belief in his Cousin Kate's ability to stand out against any amount of insistance either on his part or that of Captain Bel-lairs.

"It's hardly my place to dictate to another man's wife," he says.

"But it is your place to see that your own wife is treated properly by your own family."

"On my word, Charlotte, I didn't think you were a woman to make a fuss about nothing. I have had so much of that sort of thing to put up with lately," the young man continues dejectedly; "I looked forward to that form of misery ceasing when I married you."

"In fact, you thought I was so tame that

"I might be insulted with impunity," Charlotte says, bringing a few tears into her eyes.

"Don't cry, for Heaven's sake," he says; "it won't alter my opinion, and it won't improve your appearance."

Her rage at this last remark is so great, that she longs to rise up and tell him that she has done with him, and that she has a brighter fate than any he can offer her in store. But she dares not do it, for Clement Graham has decreed that the time is not ripe yet, and she is too wise in her generation to risk the substance for the shadow.

For in spite of her burning desire to bear Mr. Graham's name, and to have a rightful share in his wealth, she distrusts and despises him as thoroughly as it is possible for one mean-natured creature to despise another. She knows well, that under the pressure of the smallest difficulty, he would renounce her as readily as he would cast away an old glove.

It is not a reassuring conviction to have, with regard to the man with whom she

hopes to pass the remainder of her life. But she has it so strongly that she curbs her impulse to tell Frank she can do without him very well, for fear of the evil effects which may result from a premature avowal. This hope supports her; she will taunt him well with his weak trust, and his vain blindness, as soon as ever she dare do so.

“My appearance is the last thing I think of, Frank,” she says accordingly, with well simulated meekness.

“Lucky thing for you, dear,” Frank says good-humouredly; “for you’re getting so fat that very soon you’ll have no appearance worth mentioning.” Then he takes a sheet of paper and a pencil, and makes a sketch of what she will be in a year or two: preserving a likeness to her plump person, but exaggerating it greatly.

“I think you stick on too much gear,” he says presently, his mind still dwelling upon that appearance of hers which she professes to so entirely disregard, and unobservant of the wrath and fury that flash from her

offended eyes. "All these puffings and furbelows are very well for the sylphs, you know, but you ought to go in for the plainer lines and the darker colours."

Nothing in all her intercourse with him has irritated Charlotte Grange to such a degree as this speech of his, which savours of disapproval of her style of dress. She is a woman who loves rich-textured silks of light hues, and grand expanses of white lace. It must be admitted that from the dressmaker's point of view these things become her. That is to say, they look well on her: whether or not she looks well in them is immaterial.

But Frank is an artist, not a milliner.

"I know who has taught you to like plain lines and dark hues," she says bitterly; "your Cousin Kate; she thinks they suit her. What a pity," she adds, with a laugh that is very derisive, although it is melodiously sweet, "that she doesn't allow some one to show her how to make the best of herself! She has got hold of those antiquated notions about simple white muslins, and flowing

draperies, and beauty unadorned generally. It was all very well while she was struggling along in obscurity, but when she is Captain Bellairs's wife, when she occupies the position of a gentlewoman——”

Disgust has kept him silent up to this point, but now he speaks.

“Another word in that strain, and every bond which exists between us is broken, Charlotte.”

“Do you mean that you will break off your engagement to me?” she asks; and a vision of the possibility of getting damages out of him, before her engagement to Clement Graham is made public, crosses her pure mind.

“That shall be as you please,” he says, disappointing her by the remark; “but if you do marry me, you'll quickly learn that I will have no slighting mention made of my cousin. If you venture to make it you shall suffer for it.”

“How manly to threaten me!”

“You shall suffer for it in a way that would

be very painful to a delicate-minded woman," he goes on calmly ; " I shall tell Bellairs and his wife that you are the cause of the cessation of intimacy there will be between us, for that I am afraid of your disgracing yourself by an exhibition of vulgar spite, and so making me ashamed of you."

She has no real courage. Furious as she is, she dare not resent this severe rebuke, for is she not still uncertain of her ground with Clement Graham ? Like a half-bred hound, she quails when a determined hand is raised against her. Like a half-bred hound, she is willing to crawl to the heel that kicks her, rather than stand up against the severity. All she dares to do is to smile that false, set smile of hers, which adapts itself to every occasion, and passes muster for sunshiny amiability in the eyes of the unobservant.

" You have a most forgiving spirit, Frank : I like that in a man. You have no angry feeling against her because you couldn't get her to love you."

He gives his head an impatient shake. Knowing, as he does, how well he had got his Cousin Kate to love him at one time, it is rather hard on him to be told that he has failed to win her affection altogether. However, his manliness constrains him to be silent under the taunt.

“A very forgiving spirit,” Charlotte goes on, quietly; “for not only did she fail to see your merits herself, but she tried so hard to make me see your demerits.”

“And love made you blind, I suppose you mean me to believe,” he says, laughing lightly. “Come, now, Charlotte, don’t try any humbug of that kind on with me; it might answer if you had an ass like Graham to deal with——”

He pulls himself up in his scoffing speech, for, to his surprise, the lady of his love has become scarlet in her usually pale face.

“How you all profess to despise Mr. Graham,” she says, “and yet how gladly you all jumped at him for your sister!”

“Look here, don’t make mistakes,” he

says seriously. "Gertrude is wilful, and the way she chooses to go she will go; but if any sacrifice on my part could separate her from that fool, I'd make it gladly."

For a moment, as the tones of the perfect contempt he feels for Clement Graham ring in her ear, she feels inclined to stick to the man and relinquish the cur. But she thinks again of the money that will be her portion, and the mortification that will be the portion of the Forests, when she has compassed her present ends. These reflections save her from being honest for once in her life, so she merely twirls the ring of promise upon her finger, and tries to caress Frank into a state of apathy about her actions and intentions, until the time is ripe.

CHAPTER XI.

STRONG IN WEAKNESS.

“It will be hard on me, but I think it will be better for you,” Mrs. Durgan says.

“I think it will be as well, perhaps; but very unpleasant,” Kate half assents.

“Why, in the name of Heaven, should family feeling come to the fore now, just to make things disagreeable all round,” Captain Bellairs puts in. “Tell them that you’ll be married where you like, Kate; and, for mercy’s sake, like to be married without parade and fuss.”

These speeches are made with reference to a proposal made in Mrs. Forest’s rather florid letter of congratulation. The proposal is to the effect that her hitherto slighted and neglected niece shall go up to be made

much of in the eyes of all men on the occasion of her auspicious marriage. As it happens, the proffered honour is rather a white elephant, for Kate had contemplated a quiet wedding, shorn of all ostentatious show and fuss, from Breagh Place.

Still, these Forests are her only relations, and she does like the idea of her own tribe coming to the fore with a recognition of her existence, now that she is to be taken into the tribe of a stranger. The blood tie is a strong one, after all, and few women of respectable birth fail to feel its influence at any momentous crisis of their career.

“As far as my own feelings are concerned I’d rather take the leap in the dark from Breagh Place,” Kate says; “but I know what the general impression will be if I do—that I’m an utter waif and stray.”

“I think as a matter of social expediency Kate is right to go to you from under the family roof-tree. Harry, grasp the olive-branch always, no matter how feeble the pretext under which it is held out.”

These words from Mrs. Durgan decide this vexed point. But there still remains that other and more important one of Mrs. Angerstein to be settled between the lovers. That Cissy is to come and be a resident in the pretty house on the home-farm, close to the gates of Lugnaquilla, is a settled thing. But Kate has not agreed yet to the proposition that Cissy shall be her own familiar friend, to whom shall be granted the full and entire freedom of the place.

If she lived in the Palace of Truth, Mrs. Durgan would be compelled to confess, in spite of herself, that the arrangement is one degree less painful to her than the other one, which would have taken Kate as a bride from Breagh Place, would have been. Can any woman conscientiously say that she would like to be the witness of the highest tribute the man she loves can pay to her rival? If she can do this, may she be removed to a purer sphere without delay, for unquestionably she is no longer fit for earth.

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At any rate Georgie Durgan is not, at the present juncture, a "creature far too sweet and good for human nature's daily food." She is of the earth, earthy to this degree, that she does not pant to put the last faggot on her own heart's funeral pyre. "He will marry Kate, and all blessings attend him," she says daily. But she is relieved when she finds that neither generosity nor womanly sympathy command her to go and attend that marriage ceremony, and look as if she liked it very much.

It is the day before Kate's departure, and fortunately for both these women, there is so much to be done, that they have no time to grow low-spirited, or emotionally confidential. Kate has left all her packing arrangements purposely to be done on this last day, and so, during the morning, her intercourse with Mrs. Durgan is very brief and business-like. They have already settled it, that there shall be no formal leave-taking between them. "You'll be back so soon as Mrs. Bellairs," Georgie says heroically, "that

it is not worth while my taking a fond farewell of you as Kate Mervyn."

"I might just as well go straight to Lugnaquilla from here, taking the church on my way," Kate says; "it would save time, and I might put the money the journey up will cost me into my trousseau; however——"

"However, we won't cavil at the plan, now it is settled," Mrs. Durgan interrupts. "You'd never feel properly married if you went straight from here to Lugnaquilla, even if you did take the church on your way; and to go through life with a kind of vague feeling that you had never done anything to turn yourself into a correct occupant of Lugnaquilla would be unpleasant."

"As things have come about, I had much better have run away with Harry nine years ago," Kate says, half laughing. "Fancy, at our time of life, having the awful ordeal before us still of having to get used to each other!"

"You have a worse ordeal than that

before you," Mrs. Durgan says, smiling ; "you'll have to get used to Cissy Angerstein. Harry, in his liberality, will make things so excessively comfortable for her that she will remain at your gates for the remainder of her life, I foresee."

"I have had so many troubles in my life, that I won't regard her as one," Kate says with decision. She quite means what she says, and honestly resolves that, however untowardly Mrs. Angerstein may be thrust upon her, she will not look upon that inter-loper as anything but a mere crumple in the rose-leaf. "After all, she cannot mar such happiness as mine will be if I am reasonable," Kate tells herself philosophically.

The packing goes on until late in the day. She is taking up hampersful of hot-house and other flowers, wherewith to decorate the heads and hands of the bridesmaids, and the delicacies of the breakfast-table. Her wedding-dress, veil, and wreath await her at her aunt's ; they are to match those of the other two brides.

“They are miracles of good taste and simplicity,” Marian has assured her; and the same informant has added, “you will look beautiful; Gertrude will look very proper and dignified; but neither of you will come near our admirable Charlotte in purity of expression. She has, I can see, for the last week or two been cultivating the Clytie droop of the head, and, really, she doesn’t do it badly. Her eyes betray her, though; they contradict the serene brow, and the soft expression, and the smiling mouth the whole time.”

Kate shakes her head over this; but to find that her own impression of Miss Grange is verified by Marian does not grieve her very much. As Frank is so callous about his fate, why should she be keenly alive to it? “Probably he will rub on with her very well,” she thinks. “She will look pretty in public, and in private—— Well, we shall all have our skeletons at the feast with us in private, I am thinking.”

She is called down from her pleasant task

of striving to make flowers and fern-fronds travel comfortably together, by the announcement that Captain Bellairs wants to see her at once on business; and she goes to him with a half-foreboding that there is something wrong, and with a half-comical sense of its only being in the natural order of things that there should be "something wrong" invariably between him and herself.

He awaits her in a room alone in this emergency, which has arisen in every way against his will and wishes; he is not even assisted by the saving presence of his Cousin Georgie. In his hand he holds a letter, and, when he has put his arm round her and kissed her, he tenders this letter to her with the words—

"An untimely effusion from Cissy, which I want you to read, Kate."

Forgetful of her good resolution of the previous hour, Kate is on the point of refusing the letter, with a gesture of impatience. But the angel of peace prevails

for a while, and induces her to begin reading it.

“She ‘must see a little of you before you are married.’ Harry, what an importunate nuisance the woman is !” Kate says, pausing after the perusal of the few first lines, and standing a step or two away from her lover ; “do put a definite end to this folly, or she will come here and make herself and you and me ridiculous.”

“Just read on,” he says uneasily ; “she has stolen a march on me.” And Kate does read on, with darkening eyes and a blushing face.

She gives him back the letter when she has finished it, without a word, and walks away to the window, where she stands for a few moments, looking at the far-stretching line of mountains, wishing, how heartily, that she could flee away to them—beyond them, and be at rest.

“Well ?” he says presently, interrogatively. “Won’t you say anything about it, Kate ?”

“I’ll say that I think it disgusting of her,” Kate says, with vigorous emphasis, turning round quickly, “to insist upon coming here to you now, just as I am going away—just as you are going to be married; when, if she were reasonable at all, she might reasonably suppose you must have plenty to do, without being hampered by the knowledge that she is near enough to interrupt you at any moment with her fatuous folly.”

“All this is very true,” he says, quietly; “but what I ask you is, what am I to do?”

She shakes her head: at the same time she reminds herself that the situation is as disagreeable to Captain Bellairs as it can possibly be to her. Mrs. Angerstein has without beat of drum borne down upon him, and has merely written to say—just as if it were the most natural and to-be-looked-for incident in the world—that she will be at the new home he has so kindly provided for her to-night, with all her

children, and one servant, and will he see that provisions are sent in for the approaching army, together with some person who is competent to cook them ?

“ You must send your own cook—and chops, I suppose,” she says at last, laughing a little in spite of her unconquerable chagrin.

“ The place isn’t ready ; at least it isn’t fit for Cissy and her children to come into it,” he says, in a vexed tone.

“ But if women will come to places, before the places are ready for the women ? ”

“ I sent down all the servants with directions to provision the ship,” he goes on, disregarding her remark, “ and I rode round just before I came here to see if it was comfortable ; it was not that, or anything like it, Kate ; the fact is, they can’t go there to-night.”

“ Where will they go, then ? ”

“ To Lugnaquilla, if you please ? ”

“ If *you* please,” she answers promptly ; “ let her come when she pleases, where

she pleases. We have outlived the date when it would only have been decorous for me to oppose this plan, and for you to pay some attention to my opposition."

"Now, Kate," he says deprecatingly, "this is nonsense," and, truth to tell, she feels that he is right. It is nonsense, everything will be nonsense between them now, that is not a tacit admission of the reign of romance being utterly and entirely over.

"You are right, Harry; I must have had a foreshadowing of dotage, and have dreamt myself back into my youth when I spoke as I did; do your hospitable best for her, dear."

"That's right," he says, kissing her heartily; "it's so much better to have your course marked out, if possible. I know she's a foolish little woman, and all that sort of thing, Kate; but we must put up with the folly, you know, as she's my charge, in a measure; still now, if Georgie and you would only come over and meet her to-night?"

The rage in her heart is tearing at that organ like a vulture ; still she manages to speak calmly at this pass.

“ I’ll come if you wish it, Harry. I can defer my journey, and—our marriage.”

“ I’d forgotten that,” he cries impetuously (he means the journey, not the marriage, but Kate thinks he means the latter), “ things happen so crookedly.”

“ They do, indeed,” she says despairingly, wondering the while whether any suggestion of hers, any action of hers, may not even now put this crooked matter straight.

“ Well, you can’t help it, dear, so we must make the best of it,” he says lightly, still thinking of the journey, while she continues to believe he is thinking of the marriage. “ It’s rather hard on us both ; but we’re going to bear the hardships bravely together, are we not ? ”

How can he smile, how can he look at her in that way, when he is openly acknowledging that he regards his contem-

plated union with her as a "hardship"? she asks herself in an agony. He can take her and his future as unavoidable evils, and contemplate the endurance of them smilingly! While she cannot forget that he is the man for whom she nearly danced herself, and rode gallant little Guinevere, to death.

"That's all settled, then," he says hurriedly, for he hears the wheels of Mrs. Durgan's chair approaching, and he puts the unpleasant letter away hastily into his pocket; "it's a bore, of course, but we must make the best of things, Kate. I shall come with you as far as Kingstown to-morrow, you know."

"I can go alone, as I came," she says rather coldly; "it will be rather soon for you to leave your guest; think of her claims upon you!"

He has not the most remote idea that Kate is employing the weapon of sarcasm against him. In imagination he has wandered very far away from the disturbing

Cissy, and it does not occur to him that she is still rankling in Kate's breast.

"I've been thinking," he says presently, "that we needn't come back and settle down here for some months to come. I don't want a Christmas here. The people on the land shall have the bloated bullock and the barrelled beer to their heart's content, but we will take deeper root in the soil before we throw out our social tendrils. I should like to winter in Rome, and come back to Lugnaquilla early next summer."

She hails his proposal delightedly. It augurs well for her ; she feels that he is ready to isolate himself from all his land ties for her sake.

"They won't regard you as an absentee, and shoot you through the head as an expression of their regard when you return, will they?" she asks. "If we can do it with impunity, let us stay away for ever—so long."

The last two words come out so languidly that he is impelled to ask—

“Don’t you like the place? don’t you like the idea of living in Ireland, dear?”

“I love it,” she says; then she thinks of Cissy Angerstein, and says no more.

“But you like the idea of Rome and novelty better for a time, and I like the idea of taking you to all the places I used to cruise about in my youth.”

“It will be dull for me without you,” Georgie says politely, but she, too, feels that the plan has its advantages. On the whole it will be pleasanter for her to meet them when they have settled down into sober man-and-wife-hood, than it would be to witness them bestowing those blandishments upon each other which bridegroom and bride are apt to indulge in, regardless of the presence and feelings of outsiders.

There is nothing very pathetic in the parting between Captain Bellairs and Kate this night. They will meet again very shortly, and will be married this day week, therefore pathos would be out of place

under these circumstances. She dismisses him cheerily enough, and bids him "take care of Cissy, and make her as comfortable as possible," almost as heartily as if she were not wishing Cissy at Jericho at the present juncture.

"I shall drive over to Lugnaquilla some time to-morrow, and see if I can't make some suggestions that will hasten on the preparations of that helpless Cissy's house," Mrs. Durgan says, when they are going to bed. "She's not one to put her hand to the wheel for herself, is she ?

"No ; especially when a turn of the wheel may——" Kate pauses doubtfully.

"May what ?"

"Move her from a state of positive comfort and luxury into one that is only comparative."

When she says this, Mrs. Durgan knows that the same thought is in Kate's mind as is in her own, namely, that Mrs. Angerstein will be uncommonly hard to detach from Lugnaquilla House itself.

CHAPTER XII.

CISSY MAKES THINGS PLEASANT.

As Captain Bellairs rides home this night, it does not occur to him that Kate can have any objection, beyond the fear that it may inconvenience him, to the fact of Mrs. Angerstein being quartered upon him for an indefinite period, until indeed such time as her own house shall be ready for her. That the idea of Mrs. Angerstein being domesticated with him, even for the shortest time, is obnoxious to Kate, in a delicately fine womanly way that need not be defined, is a thought that never crosses his brain. "Poor little woman! she has always been a bother to me," he says cheerfully to himself, as he gallops up the avenue to his own door. A faint flash of hope that Mrs. Angerstein may

be gone peacefully to her repose irradiates his path, but this is put out the instant he enters the house.

“The lady’s waiting to see you in the library, sir,” the servant tells him; and to the library he goes, wishing, for all his chivalry and hospitality, that Mrs. Angerstein were either at the other side, or at the bottom, of the Channel.

Cissy comes to meet him, looking prettier than ever he has seen her look. The faded, haggard expression has vanished; for Mrs. Angerstein is one of those women who always beautify under conditions of absolute physical comfort, if they have, at the same time, some sort of assurance that the comfort will be a permanent thing with them. Their good looks are not dependent on anything like mental excitement or pleasure. If they are well-dressed, well-fed, and well-housed, they look pretty. If they are none of these things, they look most disenchantingly plain and uninteresting. Cissy, being all these just now, looks almost lovely.

She is dressed in one of those softly-falling silver-grey cashmeres that are never too much or too little for any occasion. Her blonde hair is brushed plainly back, and tied in a bow behind her shapely little head with a silver-grey ribbon. She has on a few well-chosen ornaments of jet, and his manly taste, which is always for simplicity, when simplicity is united with beauty, approves her highly.

She speaks — which is rather a pity, as the women who depend entirely on these accessories should never open their mouths.

“You have come back at last, Harry. I ought to have known I wasn’t wanted here, now that you have to give every moment and every thought to Miss Mervyn.”

There is a very spiteful ring in her voice, as she utters Kate’s name, but Captain Bellairs will not notice it. The woman before him has a good many claims on his consideration, he reminds himself; her father was his friend, and one of the best

fellows going. Additionally, Cissy herself is looking very pretty in the picturesque room which Charlotte Grange had deemed it would not be love's labour lost to sketch, and the becoming grey cashmere.

He extends both his hands, and she yields him hers. He smiles a smile of honest, frank welcome down upon her, and she bends her head beneath it with a blush, as he says heartily—

“I knew your comfort would be well attended to in my house, dear; and you knew that it was impossible for me to be here in person to tell you how glad I am to see you. Kate leaves for England to-morrow.”

Her eyes widen and glisten in surprise and delight.

“Leaves for England! and you are here?”

“Yes, but only for a couple of days. Her people will have her, you know; so we are going into harness together this day week, in company with the other two couples.

Before I start I must see you down at your own little place happy and comfortable, for Kate and I won't be back for some long while to look after you."

Her eyes widen with surprise and annoyance now. "Is it so near as that?" she asks piteously; "you might have let me know; you might have given me a little more time than this, Harry."

To be taken unawares, and charged with not having rendered up a fuller account of himself, as if it were a fault, staggers him for a moment, and he contemplates making a lame excuse, but thinks better of that in an instant, and changes the subject.

"It's warmer here than across the water, isn't it, Cissy? Was she a good steamer that you came by? But of course she was; they are all good from Holyhead to Dublin. How did the children stand it? Have you had supper?"

She frets under each question. If the steamer had been ten times more comfortable and equable than she was, Cissy would

find cause of complaint against her, and all in authority in her, now.

“The steamer may have been good enough, but never mind, that’s past, and thank goodness I haven’t to cross in her again directly. The stewardess was very negligent, very negligent indeed, Harry ; I wanted her several times, and she wouldn’t come to me, because she was attending to other people. I was very much disgusted with her, very much indeed ; and now to come here, and find that you are going away directly !”

The form swathed in the soft-falling grey cashmere sways away from him, and makes for the sofa, where it reclines with a bent head, and handkerchief to its eyes.

He feels that she is a fool for making this display of false and uncalled-for feeling. He also feels that he is a fool for being influenced by her conduct even for a moment. At the same time he knows that he is, and that he will continue to be influenced by it, and he is most sorely vexed with himself,

and savage with her for giving him cause for vexation.

But, again, she looks so utterly weak and helpless, and both by her manner and by her words she proclaims herself to be so entirely dependant on him, that he cannot help pitying her, and, in a measure, feeling affectionately towards her.

“I wish you would have some supper, and then go and get a good night’s rest, Cissy,” he says, practically. “I shall want to have you strong and well, and able to see about things with me to-morrow, down at your own little place, you know.”

“Is it a very little place?” she asks.

“Well, it’s not a mansion, you know,” he says lightly; “originally it was a little farm cottage, but it’s been added to, and improved into what I think you’ll call a very pretty, picturesque little place.”

She looks gloomily into space for a few moments, then she says, discontentedly—

“Won’t it be very lonely for me, if you’re going away?”

"There are some very nice people living about here, and you'll soon know them."

"But is there no town or large village near?"

"There's a very good market town about seven miles from here."

"Seven miles!" she holds her hands up in horror; "how am I to do my shopping?"

"My dear Cissy, you surely didn't come expecting to find the Haymarket stores and Leadenhall market in the heart of the Wicklow mountains, did you?" he says good-naturedly. Then he adds, "Let your mind be at rest though, Cissy, you can always have the car from here to go and do your shopping."

"I never like driving in a borrowed vehicle," she says.

"Then I'll see about getting you one of your own."

"And who is to drive me? it's nonsense talking about giving me a car when I shall have no one to drive me, Harry," she says pettishly.

“You can always have one of the men from the stables here.”

“Thank you ; but I dislike borrowed servants as much as I do borrowed carriages. It would be different if you were going to be at home to order things yourself for me ; but as soon as I come you’re anxious to go away, or you’re persuaded to go away, or something, and I am to be left to do the best I can in a strange place, that I know will never agree with me, among a set of people that I know I shall never like.”

If he were not benefiting her to the great extent he is doing, the words which rise to his lips would pass them. They are—

“Then why the devil did you come?” but he remembers just in time that she is utterly dependant upon him, and checks himself.

“You’ll find the people and the place better than you anticipate,” he says cheerfully ; “and when Kate and I come back, you’ll be all right.”

She shakes her head in a dolefully petulant way, and replies—

“Ah no! it will not be a bit like it would have been if you hadn’t been going to marry. You won’t be like the same person to me when you have a wife to interfere between us; I know you won’t.”

“You just wait and see,” he says, with vivacity that is rather forced and strained. Arguing with a fool is never a very pleasant process, but when selfish ill-temper is added to the folly, the work becomes laborious to the last degree.

“And what am I to do about servants?” she goes on peevishly. “I only brought a nursemaid with me; and so I suppose I shall have to put up with anything I can get here.”

“You’ll get very good ones—at least, I have,” he says.

“Ah! you think you have. Men never know whether their servants rob them or not; but I am very particular, and I know the servants will give me trouble. I feel sure they are not clean?”

He is an Irishman to the very core of his heart, and this aspersion which she casts upon his compatriots galls him sorely. Still he will not allow himself to show any annoyance with the helpless, defenceless little woman, who is acting upon him like a moral blister.

“And they’re all such fearful liars,” she goes on fractiously. “I know they are; Harry. I have always heard that they are; besides, I have found them out when I have had anything to do with them.”

“Come, Cissy, your experience can’t be very large,” he laughs. “You have been about twenty-four hours in the country, and you have met with bad specimens, or you may have made a mistake; give them the benefit of the doubt.”

She feels so bitter, from the effects of wounded vanity, and despair of ever weaning him away from Kate, that she waxes ruder and ruder in her wrath, after the manner of baffled, ill-tempered women.

“I know a great deal about the Irish

character, as it happens," with a derisive laugh that sounds something between a sniff and a snort; "and I thoroughly despise it. High and low, they're all deceitful alike; not one of them to be relied upon; not one of them to be trusted."

"Have you had occasion to distrust me once during all these years?" he asks gravely, but gently—with the gentleness that only a thorough man can show to a snarling, scratching cat of a woman.

She has meant to gall, to insult, to wound him about the nationality which is so dear to him; but now that he shows himself to be ever so slightly stung by her, she repents herself of the exploit. Her repentance is not the fruit of remorse for having pained him, but is solely caused by a fleeting dread she has that she may have taxed his patience too far, and that he may be less regardful of her for the future.

To tell the truth, he would condone all her offences against Ireland, good taste, and himself, if she would only release him

now and let him go off to rest. He knows well that he will have a hard time of it with her to-morrow. His prophetic soul warns him that she will carp at the house, the furniture, the situation, the scenery, and both the society and the want of it, which are to be her portions here. To combat all these cavillings will be fatiguing. Therefore, again he reminds her that her journey has been a long one, and that she will need all her strength to-morrow, and this time he is successful ; for Cissy says, with a pout that had been pretty fifteen years ago—

“It’s evident that you don’t want me, Harry. I’m sure, if I had thought I should be so terribly in your way, I wouldn’t have come.”

“This kind of thing will become a bore if it isn’t stopped before Kate and I come back,” he says to himself with a yawn, as he lounges up to bed at last ; “probably, though, she’s a little out of gear. She’s not accustomed to travelling : she’ll be all right to-morrow.”

In view of this brighter possibility, his spirits rise again, and he feels almost glad that poor Cissy has come to be taken care of by Kate and himself under the very shadow of his own roof-tree. He is either ignorant of, or has forgotten, the fact that women of the Cissy calibre are always "a little out of gear" about something.

Unquestionably Cissy is in a better mood next morning. She is a woman who can very quickly throw off the recollection of one of her exhibitions of abominable ill-humour, and she labours under the impression that what she has forgotten other people are vilely inhuman and narrow-minded to remember. She has got up a little fit of enthusiasm about "the delightful novelty it will be to drive in an outside car over to her own house, which she has never seen yet," and she is childishly impatient to start.

Her ardour suffers no diminution at sight of the house, which is a pretty cottage prettily furnished. She plans

flower-beds and abodes for fancy poultry and fancy pigeons. Hesitatingly, but still as if the thought of it were very near and dear to her, she suggests that "perhaps a little conservatory—quite a little unpretending one—might be run out from the drawing-room window." She reminds Harry that during the term of her residence at Barnes she had been surrounded with every comfort and elegance, and that it would be unnatural in the extreme to expect her to do without these things now. In his delight at the gleam of sunshine which has succeeded the bitter frost of the previous night, Captain Bellairs promises the conservatory, the poultry, the pigeons, and a few other trifles which are entered in her list of essentials to her being. But for all his acquiescence in her schemes, the sunshine is more evanescent than the clouds have been. When they reach home they find that Mrs. Durgan has driven over to call on the stranger; and Cissy's suspicious soul is in arms at once.

“She surely might have given me a day or two to rest before she came over prying, to see what I am like, and what I am going to do. I don’t think I shall go in.”

This she says to Captain Bellairs as they get off the car at the door, and are told that Mrs. Durgan is within, waiting to see them.

“All right,” Captain Bellairs says carelessly. It matters very little to him whether Cissy makes her appearance at the luncheon table or not. He has a good deal to say to his cousin ; and a little quiet conversation with her will be a relief to him, after the gusty interview he has been having with Cissy.

But to find herself relinquished so lightly, to find that he is equally resigned to her absence as to her presence, is not at all what Cissy has anticipated.

“I suppose you mean that I needn’t take the compliment of her call to myself at all, Harry? I’ve no doubt that she didn’t come to see me. I’m not so easily blinded : of course she has come to see you. I can

believe that readily enough. But all the same she would like to have an opportunity of picking holes in me, and I won't give it to her. I shall not come in."

Nevertheless, in spite of this strongly announced determination, Mrs. Angerstein does come in, and does give all the powers of her very small mind to the task of striving to find Mrs. Durgan out in any attempts to "pry and spy" into her plans and antecedents. Failing to do this—for Mrs. Durgan is a gentlewoman—Cissy waxes sulky and silent while Captain Bellairs is with them; and when he leaves them for a time, she warms into a sham confidence, and tells Mrs. Durgan that it is very hard that she should be compelled to come and "pass the rest of her life in a place that will never agree with her; never! she feels sure."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DAY BEFORE THE WEDDING.

THE day before the three weddings arrives, and all things remain very smooth on the surface. Mr. Clement Graham has not strung his noble soul up to the point of telling the Forests, or letting the Forests suspect, that he designs to rob them of that priceless boon, Charlotte. She has tried all her arts upon him to induce him to do this, for, in spite of her vanity, she knows that the Forests will relinquish her without hesitation. She has tried wheedling, she has tried covert sneers at vacillation, she has tried loving huffiness ; and all have failed. Clement Graham will eat dirt freely enough, but he will eat it at his own time, and in his own way. He will not be hurried. He

will have as little as possible of the excitement and scenic effects which will be produced immediately his change of determination is known in the family. In the mean time all he asks is "love and peace," and he gets plenty of both, for Charlotte can feign most admirably.

But on this last day, before the three happy pairs are to be united, Miss Grange becomes just a little more anxious and exacting than she has ever shown herself to be before. That she will be led to the altar seems to be a fixed certainty, but then it is tantalizing—even to Charlotte Grange—not to know by which man she will be led there. "He can't mean to let things take their course, until we all stand before the altar, and then announce the change in the programme, surely?" she asks of herself as she rises from her bed very early this morning; "and yet, if he doesn't take me away to-day I shall feel compelled to go on, as the Forests expect me to go on, for I won't be left in the lurch by both men."

It happens that Frank comes upon the scene very prematurely, as she thinks, this day. In spite of her normal placidity, she is too much excited by the harassing uncertainty of her position, to be able to bestow that amount of attention upon him which is necessary in order to keep him in a state of unsuspicion. It is difficult even for her to respond to Frank's remarks relative to what they will do and where they will go on their wedding tour, when she is expecting anxiously to be married to another man; and she tries to pass off her preoccupation and watchfulness as only the effects of certain doubts and fears she is entertaining relative to her packing and her dresses.

"I feel that instead of staying here talking to you, Frank, I ought to be upstairs superintending Mrs. Grange's maid. I shall never know where to look for a single thing, if I let her do all the packing without me," she says at last, as her impatience to get safely rid of him overmasters her sense of

its being expedient not to let him see that she is so. A grinding fear assails her that Clement Graham may come in at any moment, and that he, being utterly unreasonable, may resent the fact of Frank's being there, or that Frank may resent Clement Graham's unaccountable appearance, and so bring about an explanation which may end in her confusion.

"Never mind the packing ; things always turn up when you want them, I find. If I were you, Charlotte, I wouldn't take too many boxes. You won't want anything like dress, you know : we're not like Graham and Gertrude, going to swell about in Paris. A yachting dress, and one or two things of that sort, will be enough for you."

She draws the corners of her mouth down a little in disdain at his limited ideas of feminine need in the matter of dress, and smiles in derision at the thought of how surprised he will be when he finds that it is "Graham" and herself who are "swelling"

it about in Paris or elsewhere ; and that a seaside retreat with a single yachting dress is far more likely to be Gertrude's portion.

"Please let me be the judge in these matters, Frank," she says, rising up, for she hears a visitor's knock, and her prophetic soul tells her that it is Clement Graham. She tries to keep the peace to the last ; tries to mutter something coherent about the packing ; tries to give him her hand and a loving smile heartily and feelingly. But her eyes wander restlessly to the door, and Frank has a sudden instinct that all is not well, that there is some screw loose, that in some way or another he is being imposed upon and tricked.

"What is it, Charlotte ?" he asks, holding her detainingly. "This is hardly the way to take leave of me the day before our marriage. This——"

The door is opened, and Mr. Graham is announced, and Charlotte makes one strong effort to free her hands from Frank's, but he continues to hold them as coolly as possible,

the while he bestows a stare of unmitigated surprise on the intruder.

“You here, Graham?” with an air of eager inquiry, which he checks and turns into one of his ordinary nonchalance, as Charlotte somewhat violently wrenches her hands from his, and goes with an agitated greeting to the new comer.

“Yes, I’m here,” the other man replies, awkwardly; and Charlotte feels with a tremor that if it comes to open war he will be such a poor ally. “I came to—I came to see—what the deuce have I come for?” he winds up with, impotently, looking angrily, and at the same time beseechingly, at Miss Grange.

“You have come, I suppose, to see me, and to give me your good wishes,” she says promptly. “Why on earth Frank should think it necessary to call you to account for being here I don’t know.”

She pauses, out of breath with the vehemence with which she has defended the situation, and almost paralyzed by her

dread that they will try to outstay each other, and that Clement will be the one to give in and go first. If he does this, how shall she know in what way to act? how shall she know which man she is to marry? how shall she be relieved of the soul-subduing fear, that she may come to the ground between these two stools after all?

Quivering with fear inwardly, but externally maintaining her composure, she says, as a sort of forlorn hope—

“I was just saying good-bye to Frank, for I am too busy about this tiresome packing to give any more time to any one to-day. But you will like to see my sister-in-law, Mr. Graham. I will send her to you as I go on my way about my business.”

Both men accept her dicta—Frank because he does not understand what she is aiming at, and Graham because he understands it very well indeed. She goes away from them with a light nod; and Frank, who has an antipathy to Mrs. Grange, and a horror of meeting her, finds himself con-

strained to say good-bye, and leave his esteemed future brother-in-law in possession of the field.

It strikes him as odd that Charlotte is not lingering about to take one more private farewell of him ; but he is not really in love with her, and the oddness of it does not hurt him at all. Just outside the drawing-room door, at the foot of the stairs that lead to the upper regions, he stands for a moment and calls out, " Good-bye, Charlotte ; I'm off," little thinking that it is good-bye, and that he is off from her for ever.

Her heart gives an exultant bound as she hears him ; but though she hears him, she makes no response, for she dreads that a response may have a detaining effect upon him, and she does long to have it out with that chicken-hearted successor of his in the drawing-room. She waits till she hears the hall-door close after him, and then she goes down, just in time to intercept Mrs. Grange, who is surging in the direction of Mr. Graham.

“What does he want here?” the married lady says, in a loud whisper. “Busy as we are to-day, he needn’t have come here interrupting us. I think Frank might have had more consideration than to bring him here to-day; and to leave him here too! But it’s just like Frank, to have no thought for any one but himself.”

“Frank is too tiresome about everything,” Miss Grange assents. “But you needn’t see him: I’ll go in and get rid of him, and tell him you’re too much engaged to receive him.”

“I shall be very glad, very glad indeed, when it’s all over,” Mrs. Grange grumbles. “The trouble and expense it has entailed upon your brother and myself are things that I hope you won’t forget, Charlotte.”

“No, no, no!” Charlotte answers impatiently. “I’ll remember everything—and pay you for it,” she adds, with an amount of bitterness that makes Mrs. Grange regret she ever took the young lady and her matrimonial prospects in hand.

“Now let me go in and—and see what is to be done with him,” Charlotte adds in a very low tone ; and then, as Mrs. Grange flounces downstairs, breathing audible wishes for everybody’s discomfiture who may interrupt her this day, Charlotte goes in to have her fate decided.

She feels that the arbiter of her destiny is personally and mentally obnoxious to the last degree as he stands before her, glowering and stammering with rage at the unlucky *contre-temps* which brought him face to face with Frank.

“You should have managed better,” he says angrily—and his anger is so small and spiteful a thing that she is almost inclined to turn her back upon it and him for ever. “You’ve played your cards very well all along, but it wasn’t very good taste on your part to let me come in at the last and find you spooning with him—he holding your hands, and all that kind of nonsense.”

“Do remember that you have tied my

hands, and never ceased to impress upon me the absolute necessity for being careful," she says as pathetically and imploringly as she can.

"Yes, but my wanting to see you careful didn't mean that I wanted to see you caressed! I believe you're afraid," he continues sardonically. "I believe you're holding on to him because you think that you may have to take him in the end, and not out of deference to my wishes."

She longs to tell the truth, and flout, and scorn, and defy him. She longs to show him how contemptible he is, even in her eyes—contemptible as she may be herself. All she does say, however, is—

"You will know me better, by-and-by, Clement."

"I am harassed out of my life," he goes on. "Mrs. Forest is bothering about settlements being signed to-day, and I've had to make so many excuses about not going there till this evening, that my brain seems to be going. By this evening I hope we shall be

far out of their reach, away from it all. Are you ready ? ”

“ Ready to—— ? ” She does not like to say “ ready to be married,” because that might sound indecorously definite ; and she does like to say “ ready to go,” because that, on the other hand, might sound indecorously indefinite. Accordingly she pauses, and leaves him to finish the sentence.

“ Ready to be off with me, to be sure,” he says rather roughly.

“ Shall we go and be married at once ? ” she asks falteringly.

“ Well, there will be a difficulty about that. We have wasted time this morning, and it’s past the hour already. But you had better get away from here some time to-day, and we’ll be married the first thing to-morrow morning.”

She trembles a little, and hesitates about giving her assent to this plan. She has not a particle of trust in this man, and at the same time she knows that if she exhibits anything like distrust, he will resent it in

the way she will feel most, namely, by throwing her over altogether. Accordingly she tries to temporize, to hide her real motives as much as possible, and to give false ones, as it is her nature to.

“I can’t get away from this house, and remain away for any length of time, without raising the alarm; it wouldn’t matter a bit if we could be married and get away without delay; but if I have to wait about until to-morrow——”

“Say you’re going to the Forests’?” he suggests.

“My sister-in-law would think it so strange, so indelicate of me to go there to-day.”

“Nonsense! indelicate! they’ll have their eyes completely opened by a telegram to-morrow; why should you mind what they think to-day?”

“Why can’t I leave this house early to-morrow, and meet you at the church?” she urges.

“Because I tell you that to-morrow, from

the moment you wake, they'll be on guard over you, to see that you're properly rigged, and all that sort of thing. You'll not have a moment to yourself, you'll have no chance of slipping away. No, I tell you plainly, if you're coming to me at all, Charlotte, you must come to-day."

"Then I will come to-day," she says, and then, practically and quietly, she takes down the address of the lodgings which he has taken for her until to-morrow.

"I shall have to leave all my trunks, all my jewels behind me," she says in a vexed tone; "but there will be no difficulty about them, will there? My brother is very strange—and mean, not to put too fine a point upon it—but he will hardly detain things that have been given to me."

"You haven't taken off that shabby little gold band yet," he says, disregarding her question, and pointing to Frank's engagement ring. "Take it off at once;" and he enforces his request by pulling it off her finger, and throwing it on the centre table.

“Won’t Mrs. Forest be in a fine frenzy to-night when she finds I am not there to sign settlements!” he says presently, grinning maliciously. “They’ll have their lawyer there, and no end of fuss. How pleasant Gertrude will make it to everybody!”

“How carefully her interests were to be looked after before she became your wife,” Charlotte sighs softly. “As for me, I am going to take the leap in the dark entirely, as regards money.”

“Ah, yes; it’s a different thing with you,” he says carelessly: “with her it was all fair and above-board.”

It is a very large and disagreeable pill, but she swallows it, as she will have to swallow many another before she attains her object, and obtains complete empire over his soul. She waives the subject off as gracefully as she can, reminds him that his staying longer will arouse suspicion in the household, appoints an hour at which to meet him later in the day, and finally gets

rid of him without having been subjected to the smallest interruption.

But her time of trial is at luncheon; for then her brother, with natural inquisitiveness, will keep on asking her what that "young man who is going to marry Miss Forest wanted here to-day?" Mrs. Grange, too, out of a sudden access of good feeling, adds to her confusion. Now that Charlotte is on the brink of leaving them, Mrs. Grange tries hard to forget all that is unlovely and unseemly in the character of her sister-in-law. She tries to remember that Charlotte's has been a hard, uphill kind of life, and that there have been times when she (Mrs. Grange) has been wanting in Christian and womanly forbearance towards the sister of her husband. Fraught with this feeling, she has a kind of desire to make up for all things by extra kindness on this last day, and she sets about her work by making the most uncomfortable proposal which it is in her power to make.

"We'll spend the afternoon cosily together,

Charlotte," she says. "I have just had a note from mamma, saying she would like to come round and pass a few hours with me ; but I have sent back to say that I feel that I belong to you to-day, and that I had rather she waited, and came a day or two hence."

"I am sorry you put Mrs. Constable off on my account," Charlotte says awkwardly ; "the more so as I have promised to go to the Forests' for a little time."

"Go to the Forests' ! how very odd ! to-day !"

"Frank wished it," Charlotte says despairingly. "There's a sort of gathering there, and Frank wished it."

"Is the gathering this afternoon or this evening ?"

"Really, I hardly know," Charlotte answers, with tears in her eyes. "I am so knocked about, I feel so over-driven. I believe I have to go there this afternoon."

"Shall I drive you over ?" Mrs. Grange asks.

“Oh no, no, no!” Charlotte says, with something that resembles a sob; “I am best alone for a little time, indeed I am; let me go over alone.”

She carries her point; she gets away from her brother's house without further let or hindrance, but her heart sinks awfully low as she pulls up unmolested at the door of the lodgings that have been taken for her, and reflects on the insecurity of it all.

About ten o'clock that night the Forests are startled by the advent of a messenger from Mrs. Grange, questioning them concerning the whereabouts of Charlotte.

CHAPTER XIV.

LEFT IN THE LURCH.

THEY got through the hours very quietly indeed, very unsensationally and pleasantly in fact, in the Forests' house, the day before the triple marriages are to take place. Captain Bellairs has come up, and been received by the family as its future nephew and cousin in the most approved and conciliatory way. He has not made much of the Cissy difficulty to Kate, but still he has let Kate perceive that short as Cissy's sojourn has been under his roof-tree, she has been a most unmitigated nuisance to him. It must be admitted, little as she says, that Kate is not altogether displeased at the discovery.

The hours pass away pleasantly enough.

Kate is so happy, though she does try hard to keep her happiness within bounds, that she diffuses an atmosphere of sunshine around her, and even Gertrude begins to think that nothing can end very badly in which Kate will have such a large share as she will have in the ceremonies of to-morrow.

The two brides-elect who are quartered together are very pleasant to look upon. It has been a fancy of Mrs. Forest's that they shall be dressed alike this last day, and so they appear in their fawn-coloured silks, made rather simply and flowingly.

Frank is with them all the afternoon and evening, in a state of lazy gratification at their appearance, and not at all sorry that Charlotte is not by to be compared or contrasted with them. He likes the way they have dressed for the occasion. He likes the way in which they abstain from appearing to be absorbed or preoccupied by their packing! Apparently his sister and his cousin let their clothes and jewels alone to

take care of themselves. It is only his future wife who makes these things of paramount importance.

“Clement Graham is coming in this evening to sign settlements and let us see the last of him as a bachelor,” Mrs. Forest says to Bellairs, when the latter is going away to dine at his club. “Will you come back, later on, and finish your evening with us?”

“Well, I may do it,” Captain Bellairs says; but he makes a mental reservation to the effect that he will not do it, for he has no desire to meet Clement Graham and fraternize with him for one moment longer than is strictly necessary. Then a few more words are said as to the time at which they shall all meet at St. George’s, Hanover Square, the next morning; and Captain Bellairs goes away, leaving the family alone, to meet as best it may the blows that are shortly to be dealt out to it.

They discuss their respective plans for the bright immediate future of the honeymoon

season with interest. The Grahams are going to Paris, and Gertrude kindles into animation at the thought of Worth and his brethren. The Bellairses are going on, as has been said, to Italy and Spain. "Harry made an immense number of friends while he was stationed for three years in the Mediterranean," Kate says; "we're not indiscreetly going to rely solely upon each other for society and amusement. Frank! you're the bravest or rashest of us all. I hear that Charlotte and you mean to go and be all-in-all to each other at some dull little seaside place?"

"I want to get somewhere where I can work," Frank says tersely.

"It will be lively for her while you're so employed," Marian says, laughing.

"We shall combine economy and sentiment in seclusion," Frank explains; "the fact is that baby has cost at the rate of a cow a day, according to Mrs. Constable's accounts; therefore I shall have to look to my expenditure rather carefully for a time."

“Yes, with a great deal going out afresh, and nothing more coming in,” his mother assents, sententiously. Then she remembers how very miserable this only son of hers will probably be with the woman he has most unadvisedly chosen, and her heart melts within her, and she puts her hand on his shoulder and adds—

“Never mind, Frank ; Marian and I will not require much ; I can always help you.”

“And as for Gertrude,” Frank laughs, “she will never find a pleasanter way of spending her money than in making magnificent presents to her only brother.”

“I wonder Clement has not come in, mamma,” Gertrude says, nodding good-humouredly ; “the sooner I have the sum assured to me out of which I am to make magnificent presents to my only brother, the better I shall be satisfied.”

“It’s just ten: dear me ! I hope Clement doesn’t contemplate keeping us up late to-night,” Mrs. Forest says uneasily. She does not want the effect of the rich, sheeny,

white satin dresses to be spoilt by the faded looks of their wearers to-morrow.

“He ought to see the tables to-night,” Marian puts in; “to-morrow we can’t expect him to have an eye for the barley-sugar temples which have been erected, and the yards of ribbon which have been unrolled in his honour. All concerned ought to see what’s done for their glorification to-night.”

“It would have been unkind to her brother and sister, otherwise I should have asked Charlotte here this evening,” Mrs. Forest says apologetically; and Frank replies—

“Probably she would have pleaded her packing, and wouldn’t have come. There must be something uncanny about her clothes, I fancy; they must get out of the trunks as fast as they’re shoved in, or else she has the biggest trousseau mortal woman ever invested in, for she’s been packing for the last month.”

“I really wish Clement Graham would

come," Mrs. Forest says, changing the subject pettishly. "On such an occasion he really ought to have been in good time."

"I declare these preliminaries make one wish that we had never had anything to do with the man or the marriage," Gertrude says impatiently.

"No one can say that I have made difficulties, my child. Mr. Graham appointed his own time, and though I thought it was driving it off rather late to leave such things till the night before the marriage, I raised no objection."

Mrs. Forest says this in her grandest tone. The tone, together with Clement's abrupt promotion to "Mr. Graham," sounds ominous, and casts a gloom over the family gathering. They all glance surreptitiously at the clock. Never has Clement Graham's advent been so ardently wished for in that family before.

A little silvery-toned bell tingles out the time from its home in a delicate temple of alabaster. "Half-past ten," Mrs. Forest

ejaculates, fanning herself vehemently ; “ if Mr. Graham is as much behind his time to-morrow——”

“ There will be no marriage at all ; don’t distress yourself, mamma, I am really resigned to the prospect, I assure you,” Gertrude says coolly ; but though she speaks coolly, her heart is hot within her at the idea of resigning the money, though her calm resignation of the man is genuine enough.

Even as she speaks there comes a sharp ring at the bell, followed by a loud impatient knock ; and in spite of everything they have said, and of all the bitterness they have been harbouring in their hearts against him, they do cast relieved looks at one another now that they think Clement Graham is coming.

Amiability reasserts itself, they breathe more freely, and prepare to greet the truant lover with an amount of affectionately facetious reproach that they have never lavished upon him before. Mrs. Forest

involuntarily turns up the tenderly-shaded lamp that stands on a bracket by her side, and Gertrude, half against her will, accepts and places in her waist-belt a gorgeous crimson rose that goes well with the fawn-coloured silk. While they are doing these things, the door is opened by a servant, who asks—

“If you please, ma’am, Mrs. Grange has sent round to ask if Miss Grange is here and ready to go home?”

They all, even the man who is about to marry her, dislike Charlotte more or less by this time. But there is consternation among them when this message is delivered. She is no mere casual acquaintance of whom they can say, “Oh! we haven’t seen her: we know nothing about her.” She is so nearly one of them that it would be indecorous on their part not to show the anxiety they feel. They question, cross-question, bewilder, and harass the messenger; but all they can elicit is that Miss Grange went out about five o’clock in the afternoon, declaring that

she was going to the Forests', and that since then nothing has been seen or heard of her.

"It's like an instalment of one of Wilkie Collins's novels," Marian whispers to Kate. "I want the next chapter—how I want the next chapter."

"The next chapter won't unravel the mystery," Kate says, "but don't let Frank see us conjecturing; that's a most wearying thing when a person is conjecturing himself."

"I believe she's putting an end to her past life somewhere or other before she enters upon the new," Marian says scornfully.

"I believe she's the kind of woman who destroys her records as she goes," Kate answers. "Charlotte isn't a person to leave prudential measures to the last moment."

Meantime many minutes have passed, and it is now very nearly eleven o'clock.

"Kate!" Mrs. Forest says in a tone of anguished appeal, "do go to bed; you, at

least, have nothing to wait for nor to fear ; and if you could get Gertrude to go with you——”

“ Gertrude requires no persuasion, dear mamma,” that young lady interrupts. “ Wild horses wouldn’t drag me to church to-morrow, after this ; I shall go to bed and rest as well as I can ; but all this is not calculated to have a very soothing effect upon one, you know, mamma.”

“ I suppose you will go round to the Granges’ ? ” Mrs. Forest says, turning to her son.

“ Well, no, mother ; as they sent here for information, it’s no use my going to them for any. I shall send in the morning to hear if Miss Grange is ready to keep her appointment at the church with me, and if she is, I suppose I must go through with it.”

“ It really seems to me that there will be as much trouble and awkwardness in going on with it now, as in dropping it altogether,” Marian puts in.

"We may as well lock up the dining-room, there will be no one to see the breakfast now," Mrs. Forest says: and so, gradually they accustom themselves to the situation, and go quietly off to their respective rooms.

Presently Kate is disturbed by a knock at her door, and the entrance of Gertrude with one of the twin brides' dresses hanging over her arm.

"Pack this up in your box, Kate; you can as easily wear out two of these things as one, and it won't be old fashioned at Lugnaquilla, however long you stay away romancing on the shores of the Mediterranean."

"I don't like your taking it for granted that you won't want it yourself," Kate says nervously, for she dreads any discussion on the subject, having no honest hope in her heart that it can be other than a black and treacherous affair.

"I shall not want to wear it for that man to morrow, at any rate," Gertrude says

quietly, "and I wouldn't bring even so much of an association as that would be with him, into my marriage with anybody else, if anybody else will have me, after my having been jilted in this way."

"You're not sure that he has done so yet, and at any rate you never cared for him," Kate says, dealing out two widely different kinds of comfort at one blow.

"But I shall have to behave as if I had cared for him," Gertrude answers; "there would be something indecent in my showing relief at being rid of the man, when I shall not be able to help showing that I am wretched enough at the loss of the money. Kate, I have been spending freely both in imagination and reality, for the last few weeks; it will be dreadful to come back to nothing, to worse than nothing, to the knowledge that so much has been spent about my wretched trousseau that mamma will have to screw for it for months."

"If the worst comes to the worst, Aunt Marian will be just enough to remember

that it is not your fault," Kate says, as comfortingly as she can.

"But she will remember that it is my misfortune, and I'd just as soon have the one remembered against me as the other. I gave a guinea apiece for some of my pocket handkerchiefs, and now I shall be ashamed to see them."

"All these are minor matters," Kate, who has not given a guinea apiece for handkerchiefs, says.

"Yes, but it's the minor matters that are about one every day, while the mighty ones only affect one twice or thrice in a lifetime; well, Kate, I ought to leave you, and I shall leave you the dress; may you be happy."

"May you too, in spite of your fears to-night," Kate responds.

"My dear Kate, I should never be 'happy' with him, that's quite out of the question, but the money would have been such a panacea; by the time I have returned all the jewels he gave me, I shall be bare,

and shall have to return to those abominable lockets and velvets, and other make-believes, that I thought I had done with for ever. I wish I had never seen the man or his presents.”

“So do I, with all my heart,” Kate says fervently, for she remembers for how many years Clement Graham’s unwarrantable interference has kept her from tasting happiness. How, indeed, it has nearly blunted her perception of what constitutes happiness, and made her painfully doubtful of her own power of appreciating that which is now within her grasp.

“I do wish with all my heart that we had none of us ever seen or heard of him, Gertrude ; he’s narrow-hearted, as well as narrow-minded ; he has a good memory for trifles, and he loves to gabble and chatter ; such men are always odious, even to their nearest.”

“I know that he would have been very odious to me, but so it will be odious to me to resign everything that I have been

looking forward to for so long ; one can't have everything, and I had made up my mind to endure him, for the sake of the rest."

"Take care, don't say any more," Kate pleads, "you may have to endure him after all." But Gertrude shows her doubtfulness of there being any foundation for this hopeful view of the case, by saying—

"No ; I shall have to endure returning the presents instead. I declare I shall want one of Pickford's vans to convey back all the things he has given me ; it makes me ill when I think of that wretched woman wearing them."

"What wretched woman ?"

"Why, the one he has married, or will marry. We won't speculate about her name ; we shall hear that soon enough to be pleasant to all of us. How did you think Frank bore the news of Miss Grange's flight ?"

"I don't think it will break his heart," Kate says. To tell the truth, though

she is going to be married to Captain Bellairs, she feels a good deal of pleasure in the conviction she has that Frank is not cut to the heart by Charlotte's defection.

The night wears itself away, and the morning breaks, and it is not to be wondered at that all in that house are on the alert at a very early hour. In spite of themselves, they are anxious for further intelligence. In spite of themselves, they cannot quite bring themselves to give up all expectation of seeing or hearing something of one or other of the absentees. But the hour for the weddings arrives, and, lo ! one bride and one bridegroom are still deaf to the roll-call.

Frank bears his part as a guest at his cousin's wedding gallantly and well, and the friendly, curious crowd, who have assembled to see the union of the happy pairs, find it hard to believe that he is the man who has been left lamenting on the very eve of the wedding-day. They find it harder to believe this story of Gertrude,

who is an object of general admiration and attention, by reason of the sumptuousness of the costume she wears. The costume had been selected to do honour to the state of Mrs. Clement Graham ; but Gertrude wears it as gracefully now as if she had never designed it for another occasion.

Just as they reach home, two telegrams are handed in. One is from Charlotte Graham to Frank Forest, and contains these words : “ My change of name will account to you for my failing to keep my appointment with you this morning.”

The other is from Clement Graham to Mrs. Forest. It is touching in its simplicity. “ Anything that may have to be returned may be addressed to me at Grahamshill, near Chester.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE BRIDE'S TRIUMPHS.

THERE is no vain repining in the Forest family when these tidings are told. There is a vast deal of unpleasantness in the position, but not a particle of pain. "You're the gainer in every way, in pocket as well as respectability," Gertrude says to her brother, "but I am an actual loser, for I shall have to give up what I have come to look upon as entirely my own."

"You don't mean to tell me that you hanker after the jewels the blackguard gave you, do you?" he asks in disgust.

"They were the only things that made me tolerate the sight of the man," she says with careless candour. "Think, if

I would have married him for the sake of them, what I shall feel at giving them up!"

"Why, I should think you're cheaply off the Graham with the loss of the gems," Frank says, laughing. "As for myself, I forgive Charlotte freely for all her offences against me, in consideration of the awful punishment she'll endure in being his wife."

"He's quite good enough for her, at any rate," Gertrude says, with a brief flash of loyalty towards her faithless lover. "We can't affect to think that either one of them has been sacrificed in the transaction."

To his supreme annoyance, the Granges will insist on regarding, treating, and speaking of Frank as a greatly injured and much-to-be-pitied man. Now that she is safely off their hands, and not likely ever again to be an expense to them, Charlotte is regarded very much more affectionately by her brother, and very much more tolerantly by her sister-in-law.

"It is a terrible loss to you," Mrs. Grange says, the first time she sees Frank after his

bereavement. "Very strong persuasions must have been used by Mr. Graham to induce her to waver for a moment in her fidelity to you. Few people know her as well as I do, and I am quite sure, when more is known about the matter, we shall find that she has not been at all to blame. Mr. Graham must have used very powerful arguments indeed to win her love."

"He probably mentioned his income to her," Frank says.

"Money was one of the last things Charlotte would think of in a matter that concerned her life's happiness, and the life's happiness of another," Mrs. Grange says piously. She cannot help remembering that Charlotte will be able to bring good gifts to her and hers, if only she (Mrs. Grange) speaks on all occasions sufficiently well of her now exalted sister-in-law.

"She owes us a good deal," Mrs. Grange reminds herself in strict secrecy, "and she must be a meaner-natured, more deceit-

ful thing even than I think her, if she refuses to pay us when I speak well of her so publicly."

Acting on this theory, Mrs. Grange goes into the highways and by-ways, speaking good words of the woman who has been a thorn in her flesh, and a severe trial to the economical part of her nature, for many a long year.

"She was a prize!" Mrs. Grange tells every one who will listen to her on the subject. "What wonder that she was contended for eagerly? Mr. Graham won her from a man we all esteem and pity! but who can blame Mr. Graham for having done his utmost to attain such an object?"

There is very little said, even by maliciously sympathetic friends, about Gertrude's share in the matter. That young lady deports herself in a way that does not for one moment suggest desertion, even to the most morbidly sympathetic mind. She openly mentions what had been her plans only the other day; she

openly states that a suspicion of either Graham or Charlotte daring to carry out such a scheme of deception had never entered her mind, or roused one fear ; she openly laments being obliged to return the jewels, and relinquish the money.

“ It’s no use your trying to check me in my truthful utterances, Marian,” she says, when her sister attempts a remonstrance. “ I had all the annoyances of an engagement with a man I was thoroughly ashamed of, for nothing ; the sting of the annoyance remains, but the sweet soothing influence of the wealth that would give me ease and freedom from every form of social discomfiture is gone, together with the jewels which represented that wealth ; I can’t pretend, after having made the sacrifice, not to regret that I made the sacrifice in vain.”

She says this to her sister, as she superintends the packing up of the bracelets and necklets, and rings and locketts, which Clement Graham had given to her

while he believed he should shortly be in a position to claim them as his own again. She makes out a list of all the things he has given her, in a clear, bold hand ; and the contents of the box, which is finally sealed, corded, locked, and sent off to Grahamshill, tallies exactly with that list.

"There were several bouquets, mamma," she says, when she has completed her uncongenial task ; "if you like I will order a dozen from Covent Garden, and send them to the bride."

"I don't see the lock of hair he gave you, or the little miniature of himself?" Mrs. Forest says, disregarding her daughter's offer as to the bouquets ; "you can hardly keep them, trifles as they are."

"Unfortunately, I burnt both the day he gave them to me," Gertrude confesses. "You see, if I could have foreseen this, I should have kept them to return, but when I believed that I was to have that hair and the original of that photograph about my path for the remainder of my

life, why, it was natural to burn them, wasn't it ? ”

The safe receipt of the box containing the trinkets is acknowledged satisfactorily a few days after their having been despatched by Gertrude. The acknowledgment is a characteristic one. It is written on a sheet of note-paper which blazes with the Grahams' crest and motto in crimson and gold, and is in Charlotte's handwriting. It is concise and to the point.

“ Mrs. Graham, of Grahamshill, acknowledges the safe receipt of all the jewellery belonging to her which has been in Miss Forest's possession.”

Just about the same time Mrs. Grange bears down upon the Forest family with an extended olive-branch. She has threatened the invasion through Frank for several days, and Frank has been compelled most unwillingly to sound a note of warning in the ears of his mother and sisters.

“That horrible woman says she can never feel herself to be a good Christian again, until she has been here to say a few ‘extenuating words,’ as she calls them, about Charlotte,” he tells them, with a vexed laugh. “I can’t fathom her motive for doing it, for she used to detest Charlotte like the devil, when she had to cater for that healthy and hearty young lady.”

“Her motive is easily explained,” Marian rejoins. “She wants to pander to Charlotte’s sweet, smiling, spirit of spite, by detailing to her how wretched we all looked when we heard the grandeur of Grahamshill enlarged upon. I know she’ll do it ; Charlotte is just the woman who will pay well for that kind of trouble being taken on her behalf.”

“If I were Gertrude I wouldn’t see her,” Mrs. Forest says.

“I wouldn’t miss hearing her perjure herself on any account,” Miss Forest replies. “I have had pain enough out of the trans-

action ; do let me get a little pleasure out of it as well."

"Charlotte has sent me a number of the local papers, giving an account of all the festivities that are going on in their honour," Mrs. Grange says to her mother peevishly, as she swoops down into the midst of that lady's undisturbed grand-maternal seclusion one morning. "She is so disgustingly selfish," the aggrieved Mrs. Grange goes on, "she doesn't say a word about our visiting them ; but she tells me of all their fine doings, and says she shall look upon it as a slight from me if I don't let Frank and the Forests understand how happy and socially successful she is."

"She's a nasty deceitful thing," Mrs. Constable, who has never forgiven Charlotte's endeavour to supersede May, says with energy. "If I were you, I would let her do all her ill-natured work for herself ; not but what I am humbly grateful that that fellow Graham has taken her away from

coming here, to make this poor darling innocent baby's life a burden to it. I'd have nothing more to do with her and her ways if I were you."

"It's all very well your saying that, mamma ; but I am not justified in neglecting any opportunity that's given me of repaying myself for the trouble and expense I have had with her. If she had married into poverty, I should have agreed with you quite ; as it is, she ought to remember, and she shall remember, that her brother and I have been her best friends, and she ought to do a great deal for us from Grahamshill."

As is but natural, Mrs. Grange sings in quite a different strain to this when she goes to see the Forests. She tones down to them her elation at the position Charlotte has attained, and her natural antipathy to that successful person, to a decorous degree. There is nothing either in her manner, or in her mention of Mrs. Clement Graham, with which they can find fault openly. She goads them, she riles them, she covertly

insults them, as only such a woman with such an end in view can. But she does it all within the law of social observances. They have no reasonable grounds for rising up and smiting her either mentally or physically, but she upsets their digestive organs, and weakens their spirit of Christian charity and forbearance, by her strained enthusiasm for the good qualities which Charlotte does not possess, and her elaboration of surprise at any one being found uncharitable enough to suppose for a moment that any other woman in the world would have resisted the temptation to which Charlotte ("after much solicitation," she observes in parenthesis) has succumbed. But she stings them all more sharply than by any of these falsifications of facts when she brings her visit to a conclusion with the remark that, "Of course, every one who knows anything at all about the matter must pity Frank most deeply."

"If Charlotte only knew with what whole-heartedness, and with what a splen-

didly time-serving spirit, her emissary came here and worked her will, she would pay her liberally," Marian says, when the indefatigable agent of Mrs. Graham of Grahams-hill takes her departure at last. Then they turn to the perusal of the local papers which Mrs. Grange has left with them, telling them that she "feels sure that they will like to see how well poor dear Charlotte has been received by the neighbourhood," and everything about the recently promoted lady seems to savour of sumptuousness and success.

"Yet we're led to believe that it is only the upright who secure honour and success in the end," Gertrude says, laughing contemptuously as she throws the most laudatory of all the journals down. "Look here, Marian! you and I appreciate glitter and glory to the full as highly as Mrs. Graham does: our means of gaining it have failed, hers have succeeded: the argument of necessity is, that her means were the right ones. 'Merit ensures reward.'"

“We are not at Grahamshill,” Marian replies. “‘The Babbler’ of ‘The Cheshire Cat’ may be a counterjumper in a general huckster’s shop in Chester, with very misty ideas as to that about which he is writing, when he describes Grahamshill as the ‘princely residence of Clement Graham, Esq.’”

“There must be a little fire for so much smoke, though,” Gertrude replies. “She’s on a bed of roses evidently, even if the roses are not of the very rarest description ; and she must have what she will like, and that is absolute power over such a weak nature as Clement’s.”

“It’s a case then of glorying to reign in Purgatory, rather than to serve in the Paradise it would be to be apart from him,” Marian says ; but Gertrude rejects this view of the case, and still nourishes the belief that her rival has won a crown.

Time goes on. The long winter drags its weary length out, and finally gives place

to the exhilarating presence of "the boyhood of the year." Now it is when they picture to themselves their home set in the midst of a delicate mosaic of spring flowers, and surrounded by miles of such emerald green verdure as is refreshing to the memory even of any one who has ever caught so much as a glimpse of Ireland. Now it is that the Bellairses begin to talk of coming back.

During their absence they have had very little news from Lugnaquilla or Breagh Place. The agent left in charge of Captain Bellairs's property, on accepting the responsibility, had resolved to keep all the minor cares and bothers which could not be averted to himself, during his employer's holiday. Cissy had only written to them once, and her letter was dated only about a month after their marriage. Her communication was not interesting to either of them, for it was a mere moan, a mere whining exposition of her own effete inability to make herself comfortable and happy in the

home that had been liberally provided for her. "My own house seems so terribly lonely," she wrote, "that I haven't been able to make up my mind to go away from Lugnaquilla yet; and as we don't interfere with any one here, I think I shall stay a week or two longer, if you will let me. Mrs. Durgan has been most intrusive and disagreeable in her manner to me; she has been here twice, and each time she has asked me if she can't do anything to expedite my move into the cottage. Your agent, Mr. Corkran, appears to be a most sensible man. I have had to consult him several times, and to appeal to him when the servants have not been behaving as I knew you would wish them to behave. Tell Mrs. Bellairs that when I picture her in that humble little home in which I saw her first in Somersetshire, I can hardly realize her as the mistress of Lugnaquilla. What changes! what ups and downs there are in life, to be sure!"

"It's a pleasant letter; just exactly like Cissy," had been Kate's sole comment on

this epistle, when she handed it back to her husband. In the first flush of her long-deferred happiness, she has no feeling of anger or annoyance against the writer of it ; Cissy at that distance is no stumbling-block, she is a mere easily-bent-aside twig in her path.

But now the time has come for them to go home : to go back to that home in which her children ought to be brought up with the knowledge that she reigns there as supreme queen ; and she does begin to feel curious as to what will be the aspect of affairs when she shall arrive there. Mrs. Durgan's communications have been few and brief, and in them she has never made any mention of Mrs. Angerstein. "I want you home," she has said several times ; "the property wants you home ; the people on your land, and the servants in your house, will all be the better for your return." They read her letters, and say to each other, "How hearty she is, and how she loves us !" but they never suspect that any

stronger motive than mere desire for their presence impels her to write as she does.

“I do hope Cissy will not come up to the house the instant we arrive,” Kate says to herself once or twice in the course of their busy, happy journey home. She has very little time to ponder upon how intensely disagreeable and disappointing it will be if Cissy should invade her almost immediately, but she has a pervading sense of how agreeable it will be to be installed at Lugnaquilla without any external aid. Her life abroad with her husband has been one of such unbroken happiness, that, anxious as she is to know well the place in which her lines are cast, she does shrink from the interruption to that life, fearing that any change, however slight, may shake the conditions of perfect satisfaction by which she is surrounded.

In the idle, luxurious happiness of their life abroad, Captain Bellairs has been astonished to find how much of romance there really is in his marriage. The universal ad-

miration which her beauty and freshness excited pleased and flattered him. Knowing himself to be lord of her mind as well as of her heart, it pleased him well that other men should show themselves ready to lose their heads on her account. It did not affect Kate injuriously, but it gratified her to a certain extent, as being a recognition of the merit of his choice ; and so it made her develop fresh brilliancy, and altogether became her well.

But now they are going home, and life will be altogether more prosaic. Kate is not fool enough to fear that she will not find happiness in the substantial forms of it that will be about her on every side ; at the same time, she does not wish to have this romance which is passing away, rudely swept aside by an outsider. "It will slip from under our feet ; and Harry and I will feel ourselves standing on firmer and more lasting ground before we are aware of this change, probably," she tells herself ; "but we must go through the transition state alone."

They reach Dublin about eight in the morning, and find a carriage waiting for them, and Mr. Corkran, the agent, in attendance to welcome them back. All along the road, Kate, in glorious bursts of thankful, grateful joy, reverts to and recalls that former drive of hers along the same road, when she was going in her desolation to be companion to the invalid lady at Breagh Place. "Nothing can depress her now," she feels, as she drives up to her own door.

CHAPTER XVI.

REWARDED.

THE fluent pen and fervid imagination of the enthusiastic correspondent of "The Cheshire Cat" had undoubtedly led him away when he described Clement Graham's residence as "princely." It is very pleasant, in its roomy, solid, picturesque, seventeenth century substantiality and respectability; but it is not "princely." It has not even a corridor of sufficiently imposing dimensions to be called a Picture Gallery! If it had, Charlotte would at once purchase some well-framed ancestors for her husband, and cause mention to be made of the "well-covered walls of the family portrait gallery," in the description of her next entertainment to the neighbourhood, in "The Cheshire Cat."

It is well situated, lying midway up a hill that shelters it from the northern blasts, with a fine sweep of wood and water, sloping away to the south of it. The well-cultivated, well-stocked farms that stretch around it, form the Grahamshill estate, and bring in heavy rents to their owner. The grounds are extensive, well kept up, and remunerative, for Clement Graham makes his head gardener render him up a strict account of all the surplus fruit and vegetables. The house is handsomely furnished with every comfort, but the furniture is neither antique nor modern : “ It is just old-fashioned, and nothing more,” Charlotte tells herself contemptuously, when she sees it for the first time; and she makes up her mind to supersede it with chattels of her own choice, as soon as possible.

She makes out a mental list of the things for which she has lied, and schemed, and planned, and linked herself to a man she loathes. Her love of luxury, of bright,

dainty coloured elegance, and glittering grandeur, has been kept in check all her life, nipped by the biting frost of poverty ; but she will fan and encourage, and indulge it freely now. Full of comfort, full of the evidence of wealth as the house is, there are none of the frail, luxurious superfluities about, which she sighs to see as marks of her taste, indications of her rule having commenced.

She arranges her mental list very methodically, and prepares to unfold it before her husband when they have been settled at Grahamshill for about a week. Just at present she has a plentiful supply of ready money, and the allowance for housekeeping expenses is liberal in the extreme. But nothing has yet been said about her private annual allowance ; to the best of her knowledge he has not made a will since his marriage, and he has not taken any notice of the hints she has thrown out as to the imminent need she is in of a lady's-maid.

“I shall have all I want,” she tells herself, “but it would be more gracious on his part, the little miserable screw, if he gave them to me without my asking for them; however, he will soon learn to anticipate my wishes—and how unpleasant it will be for him if he fails to supply them.”

She tells herself this with an exultant throbbing in her heart. The woman who has borne poverty, dependence, privation, humiliation so placidly, determines to be revenged on her former fate now. She resolves upon being envied, admired, courted, copied, exalted! She resolves also upon eventually snubbing all those who are powerless, who may so envy, admire, court, copy, and exalt her.

Before she can set about her noble mission, it is necessary for her to gauge exactly the extent of her influence over her husband, and over her husband's purse. She believes both to be unlimited: at any rate, she fully intends stretching the limits to the utmost.

It is easy enough to incline him to parade himself and his riches, and his handsome, well-dressed wife about the neighbourhood, in order the more fully to display them. But when it comes to the question of making a return for these hospitalities, the old Adam crops up, and Mr. Clement Graham avows that he does not see the necessity for "doing anything of the kind yet." Directly the propriety of his opening his own portals is suggested to him, he begins to "sigh for a little quiet, and finds out that late hours do not agree with his health." Being uncertain of her ground still, and finding that he holds the purse-strings, and they will not relax unless at his free will and pleasure, and that the servants are unable to order anything "unless master checks the order," the mistress of Grahams-hill finds herself compelled to relinquish the grand series of dinner-parties and at-home's, by means of which she had designed to glorify herself, and to popularize her reign at Grahamshill.

At first there is variety enough in being driven about in a well-appointed carriage, for the woman whose career has been so monotonous. But after a while, even the belief that people are pointing her out as the lady whose beauty made Mr. Graham false to his vows to another woman, pales upon her. It is dull work lunching and dining and spending the long winter evenings alone with a man who has not an idea in his head, or a good feeling in his heart. If he were only a clever demon she thinks she could tolerate him better, and if he were an amiable fool she really might become fond of him, in this solitude. But he is neither of these things, and gradually she comes to hate him, and to be weary of her existence, elaborately adorned as it is with most of the externals that the heart of woman can desire.

It is useless reminding him of his promise that she should taste the joys of foreign travels. He has had enough of it himself, and, now that he no longer wants to bait

his trap with promises, he openly announces that he has no intention of "bothering himself and upsetting his household" by breaking up his establishment again. "You're placed here now, and precious well placed too," he reminds her; "and you must make yourself as well contented as you can; at any rate, I've no intention of taking you——"

"Not even to London?" she asks sulkily, one day; and he tells her, "No: he had enough of London while he was philandering after Gertrude Forest; but that she can go up, if she likes to go and stay with her brother."

Now, to go and stay with her brother—to breathe the same atmosphere which she was obliged to breathe while she was in bondage, is a course against which all Charlotte's nature revolts. She dislikes a good many of her fellow-creatures, but she hates her sister-in-law. "To be in that woman's house again would be purgatory to me," she says to herself; "but to be in

exquisitely luxurious little lodgings near her, to mortify her day by day with the contrast between 'then and now,' would be paradise."

But until all is settled, until she has clearly ascertained what will be the state of her funds, she dare not openly proclaim her sentiments on the subject to Mr. Graham. For the latter has developed in domesticity one of those carping, fault-finding, detestably disagreeable spirits that cowers a whole household, and makes every other human being under his roof-tree nearly sacrifice their rights of humanity rather than "put out" the ruling evil genius.

"There will be my four hundred a year pin-money, but of course you will make me some extra private allowance for the month or two I am in town?" she says to her husband one morning, and his answer is not auspicious.

"We will talk about your 'pin-money,' as you call it, by-and-by; but why the devil you calculate on having four hundred

a year to squander on your private follies I don't understand," he answers peevishly.

She feels that now the tug of war between the lesser mind and her own is coming, and she moves very warily.

"You spoke of that sum as the allowance you intended making your wife, Clement," she says temperately. "When I took Gertrude's place, I thought that I took upon myself all the responsibilities and privileges with which she was to have been endowed ; I know very well that you will never grudge me anything, and you know very well that I shall never abuse your confidence ; therefore, we needn't cavil about the form in which you make me feel myself to be a free woman after my years of slavery ; if you object to the stated sum as being too matter-of-fact and merely business-like an arrangement between us, husband and wife as we are, let me have a few blank signed cheques, and then you will have no more trouble about my little personal expenses ?"

“It’s no use your trying your canting and carneying on me,” he answers roughly; “if you’re such an affectionate wife as you pretend to be, why the devil don’t you stay here with me, instead of wanting to go and have a shine in town without me? As to allowing you four hundred a year, I’ll see you——”

He checks himself, and grunts by way of finishing the sentence; and she puts in tremblingly (for all the happiness she can ever taste in life while this rough master of hers lives is in the balance)—

“What will you let me have for my own, then, Clement dear? I ought to know, for it will trouble you if I have to come to you for every penny I shall be compelled to spend in order to present myself fittingly before the world as your wife.”

She says it all deprecatingly, meekly, rather sweetly in fact, for she hopes to move him, by a betrayal of her own sense of her utter inability to help herself, to a

more generous frame of mind. She does not quite realize as yet that she is dealing with a nature that is even lower than her own. The touch of helplessness, the crowning appeal, will not help her here !

“ You can present yourself before the world as my wife very fittingly on fifty pounds a year,” he says, with a little snigger, that does away with every particle of conscience she has in the matter of “ doing him ” in the future. “ Remember, my dear, how much less you had to live and dress on, when I saw you first; and just reflect what a very respectable appearance you can make on fifty pounds a year ! ”

“ Oh, Clement,” she cries, becoming genuine for once in her astonishment and pain, “ you are meaning to punish me for what I have done. You can’t mean it—you don’t mean it. Think of the house of which I am mistress ; think of the jewels you have given me, and ask yourself, How can I clothe myself in a way that will

befit either of them, for such a paltry sum ? ”

“ Oh ! make your mind at rest on that point,” he says carelessly ; “ I mean to pull in the expenditure of the house pretty considerably. And as for the jewels, why I have thought over it ; you won’t have many of them to consider, for they’re unbecoming to your station, and to the manner of life I’ve decided upon living here, and so I shall dispose of them again.”

He looks at her askance as he speaks, and she dare not rise up and defy him, nor dare she urge that he has brought her to this pass by false pretences, for the pretences on her side have “ been even falser ; ” she remembers now with agony that they have been lightly pressed in vain. In that hour they come to a clear understanding with each other, and they are not elevated in one another’s estimation. He has the power and the purse, but she has the cunning and the credulity of a fool to deal with.

“I’ll get what I want, however I get it,” she says to herself ; while he says—

“I’ll know how every penny that woman spends goes. She had little enough before she knew me ; what can she want of more for herself now ? ”

There is a fierce battle over the vexed question of her going to London, or rather over the way in which she shall go. She will not go to her brother’s house, and she will not agree without a struggle to her husband’s other proposition, namely, that she shall send all her bills in to him if she goes into lodgings. She desires to be free, to be free to flaunt herself, in a way that she imagines will be painful, before the eyes of those against whom she cherishes a degree of vindictiveness for which she herself cannot account. She is only conscious of this one fact, that she is a disappointed woman, and she does long with all the force of the feminine longing within her, to wreak her vengeance for her disappointment upon somebody.

In her impotent rage she acknowledges to herself, and declares to him, that she has bartered herself for nothing, that she has degraded and made her nature callous to no purpose. He is neither angered nor softened by the confession.

“To tell the truth,” he says, with his irritatingly small laugh, “he has suspected something of the sort all along; he has been prepared to find out that she was trying to trick him, and it is as well she should understand now that he has seen through her from the first.”

In her powerlessness she is obliged to confess to herself that she cannot alter this. She is compelled to dwell here in this well-to-do obscurity which has become odious to her (for even the local papers have given her up), with the knowledge impressed upon her mind, and upon the minds of all the household, that she is not of as much importance at Grahamshill as are the upper servants. They at least have the power of being extravagant in

their several departments. But she is debarred even from this dubious luxury, for if she indulges in it, intuition tells her that she will have to pay for it out of her fifty pounds a year.

Grahamshill is a far grander goal than any she had ever hoped to gain before that unlucky day on which Mrs. Grange, her sister-in-law, "took her up," with a well-understood purpose. At the same time, Grahamshill, grand as it is, is not what she bargained for. She panted for freedom, and she has procured servitude of the lowest description.

She makes two or three efforts to free herself from the thralldom that is so infinitely irksome to her—efforts that are ignoble in themselves, and that tend towards an ignoble end. Mean as he is, unmanly as he is, unworthy as he cannot fail to feel himself to be, her husband does desire to maintain a certain status of respectability in the county in which, by right of his landed property and wealth,

he has a certain influence. In learning this fact, she learns, also, that she has a hold upon him ; for she is aware that he has bachelor secrets which, as a well-reputed landowner, he would desire to keep from the light of day.

It matters little to Charlotte that she can never discover what these secrets actually are by fair means ; she is quite ready to try foul. It matters little to her the knowledge that any moral degradation which may befall him will be visited upon his children—if he has any. The woman who has retained her good looks by means of the placidity with which she has regarded every evil that has not immediately affected herself, says now, “ Let the next generation look after itself. If I can bend him to my will without exposing him, I’ll do it ; if I can’t, I’ll expose him. He would not serve me more gently.”

The correspondent who has told in “ The Cheshire Cat ” the tale of the handsome Mrs. Graham’s reception at Grahamshill and in

the neighbourhood, is defrauded of the opportunity of narrating some rather sensational events that occur at that "princely residence" during the ensuing months. Only the well esteemed master of that place knows that he has detected his wife in the act of rifling his private papers by means of a duplicate key to his secretary when she believed him to be in bed and asleep. Only the wife knows, through the mediumship of these papers, that she is in a spurious position; and that the title of Mrs. Clement Graham belongs by right to a poor, forlorn, abandoned, helpless, good girl, who believes in Clement Graham still, who is left to her own devices in a miserably uncomfortable home with her brother, a farmer in Canada. From the moment that she makes this discovery, and is discovered in making it by the bigamist, Charlotte Graham submits to every condition he desires, preferring rather her state of shame and ignominy, which is unknown to the world, to the open hurling down which would be her portion, if she

dared be true to a decent womanly impulse and expose him.

The picture of what that life at Grahams-hill will be flashes itself vividly before us, and will be painted. We can see the pair between whom there is neither legal nor love tie, growing older in each others' enforced companionship. We can see the unhappy children of this evil union passing from childhood to years of understanding in an atmosphere that is composed of eternal threatenings, disannullings, and false re-alliances. We can hear the bitter reproaches that only such a man and woman can utter to one another—the cowardly taunt met by the fierce, half-maddened retort—the unfeeling indifference that can bear the sight of any pain, simply because that pain is powerless to hurt it.

But we can never know how much remorse is felt by either of these people for that which they have brought on one another, and on the children who are innocent.

CHAPTER XVII.

CUTTING THE KNOT.

THERE is a sound of many feet pattering away in all directions as the Bellairses enter their own house. The sound is one that is very delightful in the ears of anxious parents when they have been apart from their offspring for a long time. But a bride entering her new home for the first time may be forgiven for finding something jarring to her nerves in the rush of little hurrying feet and the shrill treble of childish voices.

It is very confusing to Kate. As she enters the hall a little boy tears past her mounted on a huge walking-stick, and disappears from sight through an open door which he bangs loudly behind him. A little

girl, with a doll's cradle in her arms, advances tumultuously towards the intending mistress of the house, stares at her in silence for a moment or two, and then vanishes with a whoop, just as an irate nurse comes forward screaming out a series of excited and unintelligible commands to her refractory charges.

"Why, they're the little Angersteins, Harry!" Kate says hopelessly; and Mr. Corkran smiles in a friendly but respectful way, and tells her, "Yes, they are;" and that they have grown much too wild for their mother to manage.

"What are they doing here?" Kate asks, turning hastily into the library. To her own chagrin, and to her husband's disappointment, she feels herself incapable of responding warmly and cordially to the hearty greetings the servants are giving her. Instead of coming back to an abode of graceful peace and quiet, she has come back to a disorderly bear-garden.

"What could have made Mrs. Angerstein

send her children up here, to distract us with their noise and presence, the instant we arrive?" she asks her husband impatiently, disregarding the presence of Mr. Corkran. Captain Bellairs being unprepared with a satisfactory solution of this problem, he holds his peace, and Mr. Corkran responds for him.

"I know Mrs. Angerstein told nurse to keep them out of the way until you had rested and she had seen you herself," he explains; "but they're wild young things, and like to have a look at every one who comes into the house. She's got the nursery at a distance from all the dwelling rooms too, but they find out by magic if any one is coming, and they're all over the house like mad in a moment."

"Got the nursery at a distance from the dwelling rooms—all over the house in a moment like mad!" she repeats in bewilderment.

"To be sure," Mr. Corkran answers, his face deepening in hue a shade or two as

he speaks ; “ your coming home was so sudden a thing, Mrs. Bellairs, that Mrs. Angerstein has not been able to change her residence from Lugnaquilla to her own house yet ; but she has taken care to arrange it so that the children will not be the slightest annoyance to you.”

The actual wrong is not a great one, perhaps, but to Kate at this juncture it is almost intolerable. She feels that it will hardly be possible for her to bear it ; that it has dashed the bloom off her happiness at once ; that it will corrode it altogether if it is to continue. Nevertheless, indignant, saddened as she is, she cannot help seeing that there is something ludicrous in the situation. The weaker vessel has so entirely got the whip-hand of the ones who are actually in power ; the shallow-brained woman has so utterly defeated the clever one. Happily for them all, she sees the reverse of the shield at this juncture—the absurd side of it presents itself before her mental vision, and, to the infinite relief

of both her husband and Mr. Corkran, Mrs. Bellairs begins to laugh.

“You seem to know all about her movements, Mr. Corkran,” she says good-temperedly. “When am I to have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Angerstein? As she is living in the same house, she will hardly, I suppose, wait to pay a formal call later in the day?”

Mr. Corkran fidgets, blushes, and finally rings the bell. He knows very well where Mrs. Angerstein is, but he would rather leave it to the servants to account for her.

“We had better send and say we are at home, and leave it to her to come or not, as she pleases, hadn’t we, Harry?” Kate asks; and as he assents, and frames the message a shade more cordially, the servant tells them that “Mrs. Angerstein has gone to spend the day at Mr. Corkran’s house.”

“What a blessing for me, but what a bore for Mrs. Corkran, I should think,” Kate says to her husband, when the agent leaves them. “My dear Harry, this is too

terrible. I have shrunk appalled, to tell the truth, from the thoughts of her at the house on the home-farm ; but to be here, to be one of us, to come between us at every turn of our domestic life ! Am I unjust, am I unreasonable, when I say that I would rather never have been your wife than have purchased the blessing of being it at this price ? ”

She speaks from her heart, vehemently, earnestly — jealously, perhaps, but not unreasonably. Her vehemence, and her earnestness, and her jealousy bother him considerably, but he cannot make even himself believe that they are overstrained or out of place. “ If she would only take things quietly, and just accept poor Cissy—the little nuisance—as a little necessary evil, we should get along all right. Heaven knows, I don’t want the little woman and her flock here ; but as she is here it’s awful that Kate will insist on making the worst of it.”

So he soliloquizes when he is left to himself by-and-by, while Kate makes her way

over so much of the house as has not been annexed by Mrs. Angerstein. That lady has made herself very comfortable at Lugnaquilla. Thanks to the courtesy of Mr. Corkran, the agent, she has had three or four rooms made to open one into the other, and certainly they form a very handsome suite. They are painted and papered to perfection, and are altogether the most comfortable and convenient rooms in the house. Quietly, and in the most matter-of-fact way, the housekeeper, who is guiding Mrs. Bellairs through her own territory, speaks of what Mrs. Angerstein does, and of what Mrs. Angerstein intends to do, until the young wife writhes within herself and says—

“It is a nightmare! it is a nightmare! Better fifty thousand times that he had never married me, than that he should have hampered himself with both of us.”

Her house is not her own. This conviction deepens upon her hour by hour, as the day—the first day of her reign—drags itself along.

At every turn she is met by some reminder of Mrs. Angerstein. Hoops are lying about in unseemly places ; a rocking horse stands in the anteroom to the drawing-room ; abominable work-bags of striped ticking and ribbon assail her eyes ; a hairless, shivering toy-terrier (a species of dog for which she has a peculiar aversion) yelps at her at every step she takes, and she is told that he is a "pet of Mrs. Angerstein's." Altogether, she is sorely tempted to fly her married home for ever on this the first day on which she enters it.

Captain Bellairs, going about, seeing to the state of some young horses who have come on and been broken since he left ; inspecting some new farm buildings, and looking over the state of his house property generally, finds the burden of Cissy Angerstein very easy to bear. Things have prospered in his absence. Mr. Corkran has done his duty ably and well, and Captain Bellairs goes home to dinner rather inclined to chant his agent's praises.

He finds Kate up in her dressing-room, having the finishing touches put to her toilette, and in a painful state of depression. Without regarding this very much, he at once dashes into the subject that is absorbing his own interest just now.

"Things are in splendid order," he says. "That fellow Corkran is invaluable; worth three times what he gets for the agency. During the two years he has held it he has doubled the value of the land. I must see about making him more comfortable; that house he is in, as far as I remember, is rather small and cramped."

"I'm delighted to hear it; to hear about the land, I mean," Kate says languidly.

"Aren't you well, Kate?"

"Yes; no. I hardly know what I am."

"Have you seen Cissy?"

"Seen her! Yes, Harry; seen her and felt her; in fact, I am pervaded by a sense of Cissy. She came into the drawing-room drawling out an order to one of the servants behind her as she came, and met me quite

as if she were receiving me in her own house."

"What a little donkey she is, to be sure," he says, but he laughs as he says it. The annoyance is one that a man cannot gauge; it is out of his province, it seems too small a thing, and it is altogether too immaterial for him to grasp at. As Kate makes no reply to his remark, he reverts to his former subject—Corkran.

"He has not neglected a single thing. The decoy had got thoroughly out of order; and when I came to the place I let it stay as it was; but he has had it restocked and drained, and put it in splendid order. He's kept the gardeners up to the mark, too; you'll find your gardens looking very different to what they did when you saw them before you were married."

"I am glad you are so well pleased with him. Come, Harry, go and dress, and come down with me; I feel as if I couldn't face what is below alone."

"Does Cissy dine with us?" he asks,

leisurely rising up and strolling towards his own room. He asks the question with about the same amount of interest he would infuse into a question about the soup.

“ I suppose she does ; I take it for granted that she will do exactly as she pleases ; she seemed annoyed at my having changed the dinner hour from seven to eight.”

He goes on into his dressing-room, and she hears him whistling and singing in a light-hearted way, that proves he does not feel the Cissy grievance to be a bitter one. In sheer impatience with her situation, Kate goes down, and finds Mrs. Angerstein already dressed in the drawing-room, with her three children by her side.

It is not in Kate's nature to be morose or reserved with children and dogs. She takes the little things, for whom she had sacrificed and worked in the old days, upon her lap, one after the other, and feels pleased and touched by the way they remember her, and fall into the habit of responding affectionately to her caresses.

“I like to have them down to dessert every day,” Mrs. Angerstein says; “it humanizes them, and teaches them good manners.”

Then Kate observes that the little girls are in white muslin with blue sashes, and that the boy is dressed in a velvet suit. “Cissy must manage well to do all this on her slender means,” she thinks, but she only says, “I think you are quite right to have your children with you as much as possible.”

“They will be with me a little too much for my comfort when I have to go into that little house down there,” Cissy says, grumblingly nodding her head in the direction of her future home.

“I am rather anxious to see your house,” Kate says politely.

“It’s little enough to see—a mere hole of a place it looks after this; but of course I must be contented with anything. Mr. Corkran has done all he can to it to make it habitable for me; but unless it’s enlarged

as the children grow up, I shall be stifled there."

"Harry will do everything to make it comfortable for you, I'm sure," Kate says, restraining her wrath, and trying not to look as if the end of all things were come, for just now Captain Bellairs comes in.

Cissy rises, advances to meet him in a fluttered way that would strike Kate as being very pretty and becoming if Mrs. Angerstein were advancing to meet an acknowledged lover. As it is, it strikes Mrs. Bellairs as being anything but pretty, and vastly unbecoming.

"Corkran is coming in to talk over things with me this evening," Captain Bellairs says to his wife, when the servants have left them alone with the dessert. "Shall I bring him into the drawing-room when we have done our business?"

Kate hesitates. Mr. Corkran is very suave, almost subservient in his manner. There is nothing wrong with either his dress or his grammar. He is an honourable, con-

scientious, straightforward man of business, and is serving her husband faithfully and well. But, brief as her personal experience of him has been, she knows he is not a gentleman, and it does seem to her rather a hard thing that she should be expected to receive him as if he were one.

“It will be putting things on a false footing if you do,” she says frankly; “his wife, probably, is no better bred than himself. It will be impossible for me to be on terms of social intercourse with her, and therefore it will be awkward to establish them with him.”

“He has no wife—it’s his mother lives with him,” Cissy puts in; and Cissy’s face grows scarlet as she offers the explanation.

“Oh! his mother, is it? Well, most likely his mother is even more impossible than his wife would be,” Kate says calmly.

“He is the best and kindest friend I ever had,” Mrs Angerstein says emphatic-

ally. "You may look astonished, but I repeat it—the very best and kindest friend I ever had. You have always been generous to me, Harry; but Mr. Corkran has been more."

"He must have been kind to a fault, I should say, for Cissy to speak well and gratefully of him," Kate thinks; but she says nothing, for she has an uncomfortable feeling that she has committed a solecism in breeding by that untoward remark she has made relative to things being put on a false footing if Mr. Corkran should once be admitted to her drawing-room on terms of social equality.

Her silence is infectious. Captain Bellairs is glad to change the conversation, and more rejoiced still to get himself away from the room presently, before he can be drawn into a fresh fray. The atmosphere about these two women—the wife whom he loves most dearly, and the old friend who has the claim of habit and dependence upon him—when they are alone together, is depressing to the

last degree. "It will be miserable if this kind of thing lasts," he tells himself, gloomily, as he begins to puff a soothing cigar. "Kate is less happy than I have seen her for months, and far less satisfied than she was at Breagh Place, when she thought there was no chance of our ever coming together again ; and as for Cissy ! I never knew before that it was possible for a woman to make herself damned disagreeable and look amiable and meek at the same time."

His thoughts are turned from this moody channel and concentrated on Mr. Corkran and business almost immediately ; and in the discussion of plans that will largely increase the value of the Lugnaquilla property, and aggrandize his own position in the county, the time slips pleasantly away. But it is borne in upon him strongly, delighted as he is with Corkran and with Corkran's capacity for business, that Kate is right ! It would be giving him a false position to bring

him into her presence on terms of social equality.

Meantime the two women are enduring each other in the drawing-room. Mrs. Angerstein is feeling almost as much aggrieved as is Kate, for Mrs. Angerstein is in possession of some secret information concerning herself which, secret as it is, ought, she fancies, to permeate the air, and influence other people in their bearing towards her. "She might be contented," the waspish little widow thinks; "she has tricked Harry away from me, and trapped him into marrying her; she needn't grudge his hospitality to me for the little time I shall need it. Poor fellow! I shall pity him when I am obliged to go and leave him alone with this disagreeable woman."

"I suppose," she says aloud presently, "that you will have your friend Mrs. Durgan over here to-morrow? You are very odd about her, I think."

"Yes? in what way?" Kate asks.

“Why, keeping up such a parade of friendship and intimacy with her after you had got Harry to break off his engagement with her. Ah ! you think because you told me nothing about that that I know nothing, but I have heard the whole story since I came here. I really wonder that she likes to come here ; not that I do wonder at anything she does, for I think she’s an odious woman.”

“I shall die of Cissy,” Mrs. Bellairs says despairingly to her husband this night when they are alone. “Don’t laugh, Harry ; I mean it. At any rate I can’t live with her. She lowers my tone altogether ; she makes me uncharitable, ill-natured, sour, suspicious—everything that I hate myself for being ; she will poison my life. It comes to this,” she continues energetically—“she will drive me from Lugnaquilla, or make me a miserable woman.”

“She will do neither,” her husband

answers heartily. "Thank Heaven, she won't compel you to adopt either alternative. Corkran has taken me into his confidence to-night; he is going to marry her now in a week or two. I am sorry to say I shall lose him, for he has got a new berth that will make him a comparatively rich man—the management of an estate in England. It's a blessed stroke of luck, getting rid of her. Poor Kate! it's been a near thing for you, for I doubt if I should ever have had the heart to turn the poor little thing out."

"Never mind what you would have done," Kate cries: "nothing will alter the resolve of the admirable Corkran, let us hope. Oh! I'll bear her so beautifully during these inevitable few weeks; but if she had once driven me away from you and home, I should never have come back to either."

"We've had a narrow escape of getting astray from each other, and no mistake," he

says anxiously. "It's been a nearer thing than it was ten years ago. After this, don't you think we had better agree to speak out to each other before we resort to extreme measures, eh, dear?"

THE END.







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